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# G20 Interfaith Forum Pune, India



# Introduction

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The G20 Interfaith Forum (IF20) has worked since 2014 to highlight priority topics in global agendas, drawing on the world's rich religious resources. Its focus is the G20 Summit and the processes associated with it.

The 2023 G20 Interfaith Forum was held from September 5-7 at the World Peace Dome in Pune, India, bringing together over 3000 attendees to discuss solutions to global challenges. Co-hosted by MIT World Peace University, the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities (IAFSC), and the G20 Interfaith Forum Association, the event's theme was "Shaping World Peace and Sustainable Development Through Interfaith Harmony." More than 1000 university students participated from MIT World Peace University.

In alignment with India's G20 Presidency theme of "One Earth, One Family, One Future," discussions emphasized inclusive, ethical approaches to issues like conflict, climate change, COVID-19, and protecting children. Speakers called for mobilizing the immense power of the world's faith communities to uplift the vulnerable and marginalized. Multilateral cooperation and just social policies were seen as essential to development and lasting peace.

The Peace Dome provided a particularly appropriate setting for the G20 Interfaith Forum because of its conscious effort to unite science, philosophy and spirituality through representative statues and other artistic motifs. The Peace Dome thus provided inspiration amid current global crises. The commitment of Vishnawath Karad, the Dome's designer and founder of its mother institution, to value-based education and peacebuilding helps guide such solutions. Participants were charged with carrying insights from the rich interfaith dialogue forward to inform policy and religious practice. Overall, the forum brought diverse voices together to find common ground and shape a more sustainable, peaceful world.



# Welcome Reception

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To officially kick off the Forum, a welcome reception was held on the evening of September 5th in the World Peace Dome, where various dignitaries and prominent leaders of the hosting organizations gave welcome addresses. The remarks were followed by a Divine Blessing Ceremony and a cultural program, then a dinner reception.

W. Cole Durham Jr., President of the G20 Interfaith Forum Association, provided an overview of the G20 process, IF20's inception and growth, and the organization's continuously developing role today in bringing religion to bear on world policies. He explained that IF20's official recommendations had already been sent to G20 leaders, and that this summit's purpose was to further raise the level of engagement and awareness around the voices of people of faith as we look forward toward Brazil's G20 Presidency in 2024.

King Husein, a major contributor to the planning of the event, highlighted the World Peace Dome itself as "a living laboratory for interfaith peace among all religions." He noted how the Peace Dome itself, with its statues of so many religious leaders, scientists, and philosophers, would be a living example of how to meld academics and spirituality, thereby embodying what interfaith is all about. He also challenged each audience member to observe what the building embodies and incorporate that into their local countries and communities.

After a Divine Blessing Ceremony performed by Jain, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Muslim, and Buddhist leaders, Hon'ble Rev. Prof. Dr. Vishwanath D. Karad spoke, saying that the confusion in the world is due partly to people not understanding their duty. He said that the IF20 Summit brings the heart and the mind together, and pledged that he would prove the World Peace Dome and MIT Pune's worthiness of IF20's trust in holding the summit there.

All participants and delegates were welcomed to the city of Pune, then Dr. Milind Pande, Pro-Vice Chancellor of MIT Pune, concluded the reception with his remarks - recognizing the diverse group of delegates present, emphasizing the university's unwavering commitment to global peace and to the interfaith ideals symbolized by the World Peace Dome.



# Plenary Sessions Day One

## Procession and Welcoming Remarks

The first morning of the Forum began with a procession (Dindi) featuring many national and global leaders. The World Peace Bell was rung, then there was a formal ceremony including the Lighting of the Lamp, playing the Shankh Dhwani (conch shell), an introduction by Dr. Gautam Bapat, the Indian National Anthem, a World Peace Prayer, a World Peace Meditation led by Prof. Milind Patre, and an introduction video about the G20 Interfaith Forum. Three distinguished guests on the dais then offered felicitations.

## Setting the Context – The G20 Interfaith Journey

To set the context for the first plenary session of the conference, W. Cole Durham Jr. and Katherine Marshall, the President and Vice President of the G20 Interfaith Forum, offered some brief comments about the organization and its history. Durham thanked Dr. Karad and his staff for hosting the conference and apologized for Marshall being unable to be present in person, explaining that she had prerecorded her comments and sent them in video form.

Marshall's comments strove to answer some of the basic questions surrounding the IF20, including "Why the G20?" and "What is the end objective?" She emphasized the need for the experience of the religious world to stand as an independent voice without being shoehorned into other categories, and for the urgent need to draw attention to the needs of the most vulnerable.

## Opening Plenary: Interfaith Voices at the G20 Table

The opening plenary brought together religious leaders to present priorities focused on peace, justice and protecting the vulnerable. Calls were made for cooperation between faiths, ending violence and speaking out against the politicization of religion.





Speakers from the C20 and religious leaders (including Archbishop Felix Machado of Vasai and Sheikh Ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, spiritual leader of Muslims in Azerbaijan) emphasized the importance of including diverse faith voices in policymaking to find common ground. Though unity in diversity, shared principles that unify religions can be uncovered. Politics also plays a key role in driving change through ideals like peace, harmony and brotherhood. The need to reform and strengthen multilateral governance like the UN was discussed, as was India's rich diversity and the importance of interfaith dialogue in bringing forth diverse voices to achieve peaceful coexistence. Overall, the urgent need for development, justice and saving the planet to go hand in hand with building cultures of peace was reiterated. Key points included:

- Calls for ending hatred, violence and war. Leaders must unite for peace.
- Need to protest politicization of religion and stand for justice.
- Faiths can help address climate change, food/water shortages, nuclear threats.
- Restoring peace and coexistence between conflicting countries is critical.

*"Peace, wherever it still exists, is continually threatened. Leaders of all religions should come together for peace, to move away from hatred, violence, and war."* -Archbishop Felix Machado



# Breakout Sessions Day One

## Religion, Ethics, and Technology

This session focused on bridging the gap between faith and technology and advocating for ethical approaches to innovation that uphold human dignity. There is urgency for religious voices to help shape technology for social good, as technology (including the advent of AI) can act as a “Trojan Horse” to transform societies in unexpected ways through the values embedded in it.

- There is a disconnect between religion and innovation that must be bridged.
- If faith voices aren’t involved in technology, they won’t help shape society.
- Technological “fixes” alone cannot solve problems rooted in values and relationships.
- Faith leaders must advocate for ethical, needs-based technology focused on human dignity.

*“Technology is advancing at such an astronomic rate that using it ethically is more important than ever before.”* –Manisha Jain, Engineering Lead at Microsoft, ex-Facebook AI Leader

## Benefiting from Religion in the Workplace

This panel discussion explored ways that embracing diverse religious identities and values in the workplace can build more inclusive environments and mutually enriching communities.

- Allowing employees to bring their whole selves, including faith, to work builds community.
- Businesses like Google are adapting to meet diverse religious needs.
- Travel/tourism sector can promote understanding and build peace.
- Corporate “faith forces” bridge gaps.
- Living meaningfully and focusing on human connections matters more than status.

*“It’s not about bringing religion into the workplace – it’s already there. It’s about valuing and understanding people.”* –Brian J. Grim, President, Religious Freedom and Business Foundation



## Women Empowerment

This session examined persistent challenges and solutions to achieving equal rights, status, opportunities and inclusion for women globally. Patriarchal biases in societies and religions were acknowledged.



- Gender equality essential for a balanced, mature society.
- Patriarchal biases in religions have failed women.
- Laws aren't enough; transforming cultural attitudes is key.
- True empowerment means inclusion for women of all backgrounds.
- Men must be part of the solution and speak out against discrimination.

"Religions are perfect, but people are not." –Zahra Al Hilaly, ACWAY

## Social Cohesion – How to Bring Maximum Effect to Religious Efforts

This foundational session explored the vital role freedom of religion plays in strengthening social cohesion worldwide and progress toward achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. All faiths face threats to religious freedom.

- Religious contributions to SDGs are limited without freedom of religion and belief (FoRB).
- FoRB is vital for social cohesion and peace, but threatened worldwide.
- Respect, not just tolerance, of different faiths nurtures inclusion.
- "Diapraxis" allows joint actions despite differences.
- The migration crisis shows the urgent need for FoRB and inclusion.

*"75-89% of people live where there are strong FORB restrictions. Religions contribute so much to the SDGs, and thinking they are achievable without religious communities is not realistic."*

–W. Cole Durham, Jr., President, G20 Interfaith Forum Association



## Vulnerable Communities: Leaving No One Behind

This panel discussion focused on inclusive development, emphasizing the need for transformative education and empowering women and marginalized groups. Hierarchies and biases in societies and religions were acknowledged.

- Patriarchal attitudes must evolve to achieve gender equality.
- All faiths teach harmony, but some social hierarchies still foster exclusion
- Transformative education celebrating pluralism is needed.
- Multistakeholder efforts that include faith leaders can uplift vulnerable groups.
- Progress requires continually empowering women and children.

*"We need to be diverse. Everybody is equal and everybody should be participating. The most important thing and most impactful thing is caring."* –Lenin Raghuvanshi, PVCHR

## Perspectives on Indian National Education

This session brought together numerous university Vice Chancellors and other educational leaders to examine India's National Education Policy (2020) and how collaboration and exchanging best practices can aid its effective implementation and can foster India's global impact. Highlights:

- India must improve access, facilities, teacher training, and digital resources.
- Social-emotional learning is crucial from early years on
- Mother tongue education poses challenges, but aids values transmission.
- Examining policy impacts and collaborating globally can improve outcomes.

*"Our schools are good at teaching work skills and academics, but not values. Social-emotional skills are necessary."* –Shailendra Sharma, Principal Advisor to the Minister and Director of Education, Delhi





## Peace Building and Social Peace

This wide-ranging discussion explored complex, multilayered issues and solutions in building lasting peace within and between societies.

- Peace is complex, encompassing disarmament, justice, reconciliation, and development.
- It begins with inner peace and values formation from a young age.
- Peacebuilding requires addressing greed, hate, consumerism, and spiritual disconnects.
- More collaboration between faiths, education, media, and business is needed to nurture peace.



## Food Security

This session focused on the role of faith communities in improving food security and equity as entrenched systems exacerbate hunger and inequality.

- Poverty and conflict exacerbate food insecurity. Systems entrench inequality.
- Traditional charity is inadequate; approaches must empower the vulnerable.
- Faiths can promote sustainable agriculture and change high-consumption lifestyles.
- Reducing food waste and supporting small farms is also key.
- Ending conflict is critical for social justice.

*"The traditional way to address hunger is to give handouts. Giving handouts doesn't end hunger or poverty in a sustainable way. Giving alms keeps them hungry. We are trying to help people end their own hunger, and realize they are not inferior to anyone."* -Baidul Alam Majumdar, The Hunger Project

# Plenary Sessions Day Two

## Welcome and Recap of Day One

Day 2 opened with meditations on courage, going beyond the mind, and aligning with universal consciousness. A recap of Day 1's sessions emphasized pursuing justice and uplifting the vulnerable.

- The India G20 Presidency's commitment to inclusion was applauded.
- The 4Cs—COVID, climate, conflict, and children—were reiterated as interconnected challenges requiring ethical solutions.

## The 4 C's: COVID, Climate, Conflict, and Children

This critical plenary panel discussion examined how the issues identified for brevity as the "4Cs" disproportionately impact vulnerable populations and require faith communities to mobilize.

- Faith communities must address shortfalls in healthcare access, education, nutrition, and social protection.
- Mobilizing religious networks is key to reaching those left behind.
- Proposed solutions: healthcare access, quality education, social protection policies.
- Collaboration and human dignity-based approaches are needed at the global governance level.

*"Money, the very thing that would change things – is often misdirected. We must identify solutions and then mobilize religious adherents to make them happen. The bedrock of so many religions judges by how we take care of the widows, the children, the poor in our communities."*  
–Michael K. Young, Former Chair, US Commission on International Religious Freedom



# Breakout Sessions Day Two

## Global Perspectives on Education

This panel identified barriers to education access globally, including lack of infrastructure and training, emphasizing values education and multinational collaboration.

- COVID has deeply affected the education of an entire generation, and we're just beginning to see the impacts.
- Lack of facilities, technology, teacher skills, and infrastructure block progress in many countries.
- Values and ethics-based education is vital alongside academic skills.
- Exchanging best practices and technology is vital for achieving inclusive education.
- Students must be taught holistically, including socio-emotional needs.

## Health Care

This important session examined systemic gaps COVID-19 revealed in health systems worldwide, highlighting needs for greater community participation, mental healthcare access and global cooperation.

- Health infrastructure gaps and social inequities require urgent attention.
- Community participation, preventative care and decentralized facilities are needed.
- Mental health should be prioritized along with spiritual health.
- International cooperation and diverse faith approaches can improve healthcare everywhere.

*"COVID is not going to be the last pandemic. No matter how powerful we think we are, we are still vulnerable. Is our health system prepared for the future?"* –Dr. Subhash Salunke, Public Health Foundation of India



## Protecting Children and the Vulnerable

This panel discussed widespread, pressing threats to children's rights and safety globally, emphasizing the need for holistic solutions and cultural shifts beyond legal interventions.

- Online exploitation and abuse are urgent issues, along with trafficking.
- Legal changes are inadequate without cultural shifts and local action.
- Holistic prevention and rehabilitation systems are required.
- Progressive gender norms and women's empowerment are critical for protecting the vulnerable.

*"The responsibility to help, protect, and nurture children isn't just up to the biological parents but to all people."* -Yayah Khisbiyah, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta

## Climate

This session examined immense ethical and practical climate challenges, disproportionately impacting vulnerable communities, requiring inclusive, values-based action.

- Climate change disproportionately harms poor and indigenous communities.
- Faiths can educate on sustainability practices and lifestyle changes.
- Pressuring governments and industries to reduce emissions is vital.
- Long-term, inclusive adaptation strategies are needed.
- Indigenous wisdom and rituals show ways to reconnect spiritually with the planet.

## Protection of Religious and Cultural Heritage

This panel discussed escalating threats to treasured heritage sites and traditions globally and potential solutions centered on inclusive dialogue and cooperation.





- Preserving heritage is vital for social cohesion, dignity, and resilience.
- Dialogue, not domination, prevents violence over contested sites.
- Government and community cooperation is needed for context-specific protections.
- Climate change severely threatens heritage without inclusive action.

*“Any attack on a religious or cultural heritage site is an attack on the community. When sites are attacked, it destroys economic and social stability. Love thy neighbor. We need to celebrate plurality.”* –Dr. M.C. Rajan, St. Xavier’s Legal Aid Ministry

## Trafficking

This important session addressed the pressing need for greater global action against human trafficking and slavery, which operates with near impunity.

- Conviction rates are absurdly low; traffickers operate with impunity.
- Prevention starts with education and empowering at-risk groups.
- Faith networks can provide shelters, help with rehabilitation, and raise awareness.
- We must press G20 countries to finally prioritize anti-trafficking measures.
- We must eliminate the corruption and opacity enabling trafficking.

*“99.99% of offenders don’t get caught. Trafficking must be a priority of the G20 this year and in years to come.”* –Kevin Hyland, Santa Marta Group

## Global Youth Dialogue

This intergenerational discussion explored inclusive, compassionate approaches to shaping the future, emphasizing education access, safe spaces, celebrating diversity and learning from indigenous traditions.

- Young people worldwide must connect and collaborate to promote peace from within.
- Safety, relationships, and leadership opportunities help peacebuilding.
- Peace requires understanding and celebrating differences.
- Indigenous traditions show the way to heal divides.
- Education and technology’s impacts must be made equitable.

*“We need new leaders that can face the new issues of today.”*  
–Andres, Student at MIT-WPU



## Concluding Plenaries Valedictory Session

The forum's concluding session reviewed key themes and committed to carry forward lessons learned to promote inclusion and justice globally. Valedictory addresses were given by Dr. Milind Pande, Vice-Chancellor of MIT-WPU, and H.E. Hon'ble Dr. Arif Mohammad Khan, Governor of Kerala. Representatives from India also officially handed over partnership with the G20 Interfaith Forum to representatives from Brazil for 2024.

- Themes were recapped, emphasizing uplifting the vulnerable.
- Policy briefs were discussed for promoting social cohesion.
- Gratitude was expressed for India's hospitality and leadership.
- Brazil representatives invited everyone to build on 2023's momentum.
- A charge was given to manifest spiritual principles in daily public service.

To finish, W. Cole Durham read the forum's final declaration and call to action for G20 Leaders, which can be found in its entirety below:

## To the G20 Leaders: An Interfaith Call to Action

"Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam", or "One Earth, One Family, One Future", the overarching 2023 G20 theme set by the Government of India, encapsulates the complex and deeply interconnected challenges and hopes that face world leaders and their invited guests when they meet in New Delhi for the September Summit. Extraordinary demands confront them: economic and financial perils, raging conflicts and, linked to them, over 110 million people forced to move, mounting pressures to mobilize the finance needed to address climate change, urgent agendas on health and education, political and social tensions, and many others.



Facing these formidable agendas, the G20 Interfaith Forum highlights two critical anchors to action: To focus first and foremost on those who are most vulnerable, most affected by today's intertwined crises; and to keep a constant eye on the impact of each action on children. This appeal reflects the common and deeply held values of diverse religious traditions which call for compassion as a lodestar for action to benefit a common humanity and a vision towards the future, exemplified in the welfare of children.

Specific proposals for action draw on IF20 discussions in New Delhi, Abu Dhabi, and different world regions. They focus on four broad agendas, inspired by the demands of this Kairos moment, a time of critical demands and grace. The extraordinary COVID-19 global crisis demands a common framework for action that addresses health system weaknesses and inequalities and preparedness for future pandemics; both involve religious communities and the assets they bring. Contemporary conflicts have multiple causes, religious factors among them, and peacebuilding benefits when interreligious and religious actors are involved. The deeply worrying plight of some 110 million forced migrants is intricately linked in both causes and the search for solutions. The climate crisis demands both extraordinary leadership and public mobilization, both instances where faith communities play vital roles. And world leaders, secular and religious, political and private sector, need urgently to gauge the impact of crises on children's welfare.

Three overarching concerns follow from the "four Cs" agenda: a concern that action on international financial architecture is urgently needed, starting with addressing pressing country indebtedness and the capacity of multilateral institutions to support the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) agendas and humanitarian needs as well as continuing efforts to combat corrupt practices. Attention to the poorest nations is central to the G20 agenda. The IF20 thus supports the proposal to include the African Union as a G20 member. The G20 members carry special responsibilities to lead in redressing patterns underlying inequalities, and the IF20 urges serious consideration of its proposal for a Commission to address racism.

### Paths to Action

The G20 Interfaith Forum has focused in 2023 on specific areas for action, that follow from the broad agenda inspired by the four C's. More detailed policy briefs supporting many of these points are available at <https://www.g20interfaith.org/if20-policy-briefs/>.



(a) Children. The COVID-19 crisis highlighted urgent gaps in politics and approaches to children's welfare, both those in vulnerable situations (refugees, marginalized communities and people, and well beyond.) Child sexual abuse and exploitation is one of the biggest threats to children and the family can play a critical role in their well-being. Mental health merits concerted action. In action on digital challenges the impact on children needs special attention at international, national, and community levels.

(b) Climate: With climate and environmental issues pressing forcefully on global agendas, G20 leaders need to take specific and bold action to address bottlenecks to action and galvanize tangible progress. Priority areas within the G20 mandate are climate finance and energy transitions. G20 leadership can and should also offer inspiration and practical guidance on the innovative cross sector engagement that can galvanize faster action. A promising example is the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative that engages religious leaders, governments, multilateral institutions, and local communities to protect tropical rainforests in the Amazon, Congo, and Southeast Asia basins. Support for IRI from G20 leaders could both advance action and highlight the potential for similar engagement.

(c) Conflict and forced migration. World religious communities are primary actors in addressing conflicts and its profound disruptive effects on so many communities. IF20 urges G20 countries to be actively involved in seeking peace worldwide. These efforts can benefit from active efforts to work with religious communities

(d) With the COVID-19 emergencies largely behind us, G20 leaders and nations need to engage religious communities in concrete reflections on lessons learned. Focusing on health systems with a view towards filling gaps and greater equity is a high priority. With near certainty of future pandemics engaging religious communities in work for preparedness is an urgent matter.

(e) Massive disruption of formal education by the COVID-19 emergencies demands urgent measures that go beyond a "return to normal". G20 leaders can press nations to take the opportunities 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 inclusive planning in education, with trauma-informed approaches that draw on faith-inspired and indigenous traditions.





Education holds the key to making progress in each of the foregoing areas. There is a need for global coordination of interfaith educational efforts through a global body, consortium, or some other appropriate agency. The World Peace Dome where the culminating session of the 2023 G20 Interfaith Forum was held would be pleased to provide a venue for pursuits along these lines.

