



2023 UAE FORUM SUMMARY



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INTRODUCTION

World leaders have rare opportunities to address priority global issues during annual Summits of the G20. The G20 Interfaith Forum (IF20) has convened annually since 2014 to bring important dimensions to this process. It shares some features with formal G20 engagement groups but distinctive aspects reflect the remarkably diverse landscape of world religious communities. Faith leaders and organizations can engage on leading global issues with public officials, scholars, and civil society, thus building on the vital roles that religious institutions and beliefs play in world affairs.

On December 12-13, 2022, a Forum was held in Abu Dhabi, UAE, gathering religious leaders, scholars, faith-based organizations, and activists, under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Ruler of Abu Dhabi and President of the United Arab Emirates.

The event was co-hosted by the Geneva-based Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities (IAFSC). The IAFSC's aims and values are closely aligned with those of the G20 Interfaith Forum, as they seek to facilitate the building of bridges between key stakeholders - including faith communities, NGOs, and experts in various domains - to empower them to work for the safety and security of our communities.

The UAE Forum marked the transition from the 2022 Indonesia to the India 2023 G20 presidency. Its focus was the IF20 agenda for 2023 and beyond, building on prior G20 Interfaith events, analysis, and continuing dialogue.

The IF20 notes and gratefully acknowledges that in the years since the G20 in Australia in 2014, the United Arab Emirates has contributed and provided support to its process and outcomes.

“Engaging Faith Communities: G20 Agendas and Beyond,” the Forum’s theme, highlighted the commitment to engagement and listening, especially to voices of those who are most vulnerable and seldom heard in global forums. The central question was how, in the midst of the polycrisis the world faces today, faith communities can best engage with G20 leadership and others to address four C’s that are integral and interconnected to the contemporary crisis and agenda: Conflict, Climate, COVID, and Children.

Partnerships and ideas exchanged at the UAE Forum can empower and sustain the engagement of faith communities at global tables through 2023 and beyond.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is an invited participant in the 2023 G20 process and lends valued support to the global interreligious process. The UAE Forum also enriched discussions with its focus on coexistence and on Muslim perspectives.

MESSAGE FROM HIS HOLINESS, POPE FRANCIS



His Holiness Pope Francis sends cordial greetings to all assembled in Abu Dhabi for the forum “Engaging Faith Communities: G20 Agendas and Beyond,” organized by the G20 Interfaith Forum Association and the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities. Conscious of the profound ethical dimension and interconnection of the pressing issues facing the international community in view of the forthcoming G20 Summit, His Holiness is confident that the Forum will prove a fruitful occasion of dialogue, mutual enrichment and practical cooperation in the service of social justice and the promotion of the universal common good. In these days of heightened conflicts and tensions worldwide, the Holy Father likewise trusts that this distinguished assembly will draw much needed attention to the efforts of religious communities and individual believers to build a culture of mutual respect and to be a leaven of reconciliation, fraternity and harmonious coexistence in our human family. Upon the deliberations of the Forum, and all taking part, he invokes the divine blessings of wisdom, strength and peace.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin
Secretary of State

From the Vatican, 12 December 2022

OPENING PLENARY SESSIONS

FORMAL GREETINGS

The 2022 G20 Interfaith Forum in Abu Dhabi opened with welcoming speeches, several video messages, and statements sent by prominent religious leaders. Dana Humaid, Chief Executive of the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities, began proceedings by welcoming attendees. Expressing how pleased she was that Abu Dhabi had been chosen as the host-city for “an event that is perfectly aligned with the values that we hold so close to our hearts... equality, security, tolerance, and peace.”

Faith leaders who offered formal greetings included H.E. Grand Imam Prof. Dr. Ahmed El Tayeb (Grand Imam of Al Azhar Al Sharif and Chairman of the Muslim Council of Elders), H.E. Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah (Chairman of the UAE Fatwa Council, President of the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace), Bhai Sahib Bhai Dr. Mohinder Singh (Mukhi Sewedar, Guru Nanak Nishkam), Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt (Chief Rabbi and President of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER) and Emeritus Chief Rabbi of Moscow), and Archbishop Dr. Felix Machado (Archbishop of Vasai; Secretary General, Catholic Bishops' Conference of India).

The call for sustainable development to address growing climate and migration issues was a centerpiece. An address by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew highlighted the safety and dignity of children and of migrants and refugees.

Stronger collaboration to protect human dignity and “build the edifice of peace” and a hope for action were common themes. In framing the Forum’s objective and working plan, Katherine Marshall, the Forum’s Vice President, underscored how urgently the prophetic voice of world religious actors are needed today.



“We view this event as key in beginning to frame the agenda for what we’ll work on as the G20 Interfaith Forum in the next months, working more than ever before not only with the G20 host country, India, but with other countries as well. We look forward to your involvement and help in developing proposals and feeding them into the G20 process.”

– Professor W. Cole Durham, Jr.

INTERFAITH VOICES AT THE G20 TABLE

A following plenary session dove deeper into the vital role that interfaith voices can and should play in shaping the G20 agenda—since these voices can be valuable contributors in shaping policy. Panel participants included scholars, religious and faith-based organization leaders, and political representatives.

The dialogue focused on the heavy policy agenda the world faces today: war, food crisis, COVID, environment, migration, and more, and how interfaith actors can aid in multi-pronged responses at community and global policy levels. A far-reaching review of current global structures is needed. One suggestion highlighted potential advantages if interreligious bodies in G20 member states focused more specifically on G20 agendas, thus conveying messages to each G20 government. A recurring theme was planning a future that leaves no one behind, with special emphasis on women and youth.

THE “POLYCRISIS”: INTERWOVEN CRISES IMPACTING THE VULNERABLE

The unparalleled and interlinked complex emergencies came into sharp focus in the next plenary discussion. We cannot continue to “sleepwalk” or model solutions on past actions that created the problems in the first place. The focus must be on a true commitment to human dignity.

Communities must build resilience, deeper partnership between interfaith and global policy-making spheres are vitally needed. The Jubilee ethos of forgiveness must be reinstituted. All agreed that the polycrisis will only be solved by a truly inclusive pooling of the best available intelligence.

“What’s important about our IF20 community and the goals we’re setting is that the most significant decisions affecting our planet aren’t going to be made by the UN or the COP28. They’re going to be made by the G20 over the next five years.”

- Eric LeCompte, Jubilee USA



BREAKOUT SESSIONS: DAY 1

Each breakout session was designed to foster dialogue between panelists and to invite contribution from attendees as the grounding for actionable recommendations to shape interfaith action and G20 Policy Briefs in 2023.

REFUGEES AND DISPLACED INDIVIDUALS

Though religious groups have become more visible in the global discourse on refugees, more work is needed as the crisis reaches unprecedented levels.

- More connectivity is needed in three main directions: between religious actors and secular organizations helping refugees (including each other in each group’s respective agendas), between faiths (working together more effectively), and between religious leaders and local actors on the ground.
- Work must channel the empirical expertise of local communities and actors to the leadership of their organizations, making these lessons accessible to governmental and non-governmental institutions.

Use the 2018 Global Compact for refugees to advance multilateral action that can be generalized and systematically applied from local to global levels.

CHILD DIGNITY

As every issue raised at the G20 Interfaith Forum affects children, and safeguarding their dignity and wellbeing is an uphill battle in a digital world free of boundaries and borders, a special breakout session was held looking at child dignity.

- A taskforce on Child Dignity at the G20 Interfaith level should focus on this issue on a continuing basis and give religious leaders more impact.
- Government projects need to focus more on protecting children, approaching the argument from the perspective of the economics of investment in human capital (which directly translates to thriving societies).
- As children keep secrets and often leave problems unreported, we must help children know where the safe spaces are.
- Violence against children within religious communities needs recognition and to root out, bringing children dignity in our own environments.
- Stronger legal frameworks with actionable tools to protect children are needed. Engagement between tech companies and governments, driven through legislation and partnerships, to identify, report, and remove all child sexual material from the web, is urgently needed. When Silicon Valley makes changes, the world listens.

FOOD CRISIS

The combination of severe weather events, problems associated with the COVID pandemic, the war in Ukraine, inflation, and more contribute to today's severe food crisis. We need to recognize the failures of intergovernmental systems to act on these issues and demand more, invoking the prophetic voice of faith-based communities.

- Communities working within national contexts can re-localize food production.
- We must change the mindset that hunger is inevitable, and change our systems of interdependency and overdependency, working locally with small farmers etc.
- Religious communities are positioned to advocate protection of water sources, local lands, etc.—in addition to guiding people on what to eat (reducing overdependence on wheat by returning to indigenous grains, etc.).
- Current government policies that favor imports accentuate vulnerability. Governments need to invest in local food producers, the foundation of food security.
- There must be a focus on women as small producers, and on bringing their voices to the policy-formation table.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The Human Trafficking session explored the interconnected issues that drive trafficking and highlighted its central feature of human dignity.

- **Recognition and outreach:** Victims, survivors, and people at risk often exist at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities (poverty, the refugee crisis, etc.), and creating safe spaces for them to be helped and healed.
- **Prevention** – Understanding current driving motivations and systems within the financial and private sectors that uphold or promote human trafficking, regulating apps and other recruitment modalities, etc. The issue must be framed as one of social justice, with the G20 and the private sector more accountable for the corrupt profit aspects involved.
- **Changing the culture and mentality around Human Trafficking** – Work in all spheres should study and replicate sociological and societal shifts that made human slavery and smoking so socially unacceptable, with respect to trafficking. There is need to rehumanize and destigmatize victims.
- **Addressing demand** – The successful Swedish model against sex trafficking criminalizes buyers rather than providers, effectively using psychology and law together.

- **Building more networks at all levels**, particularly in helping governments recognize the severity of the problem and in helping survivors find dignified work to avoid re-trafficking.

ANTI-RACISM

The breakout session on Anti-Racism strove to look at how faith communities can contribute not just to inclusion and tolerance, but to the complete reversal of racism in an era where systemic racism remains rampant and hate speech is increasing dramatically.

- Religious communities must walk the walk, not just talk the talk—prioritizing diversity, analyzing and restructuring prejudiced systems within their spheres, etc.
- Love is what justice looks like in public. We must challenge unconscious biases and promote listening and interaction among groups.
- Religious actors are often the first to hear about hate crimes and human rights violations. Alongside interfaith actors, they can build more effective relationships with governments to report, help, and protect.
- Systemic change requires engaging in dialogue, identifying areas where change is needed, and engaging through policy advocacy.
- The G20 Interfaith Forum Anti-Racism Initiative's key areas of focus in the coming year will be Africa, Women, and Youth.

PROTECTING CULTURAL SITES

The breakout session on Protecting Cultural Sites focused on the connection between cultural heritage and sustainable development, including the relationship between cultural/religious sites and security.

- Protecting cultural heritage sites during times of war offers a new agenda for security agencies.
- Many avoid looking at differing cultural heritages because of their chilling effect and potential for conflict, but using them as a conversation starter and a bridge builder for uncomfortable conversations can be a great agent for change.

- Framing pilgrimage in part as religious tourism emphasizes the economic benefits of welcoming visitors, and helps open doors in countries that would otherwise not welcome others.
- Many religious leaders and communities hesitate to highlight security issues in their places of worship because they like to feel safe—but minor violations/attacks can lead up to larger ones because they don't trust government systems to be helpful.
- Sometimes tensions arise between the “museum value” and the “worship value” of certain religious sites, with one side advocating perfect preservation and the other advocating true usefulness.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In an era where conflict and nationalism are on the rise, hate is freely spreading online, and the nuclear conflict concern is back for the first time in decades. The conflict resolution breakout session looked closely at the role of faith communities and the G20 in stopping and preventing conflict.

- Religious traditions understand human dignity, mediation, and the language of peace—and need long-term support from and engagement with governments to expand their roles.
- As religious and political extremism spread through traditional and social media, religious communities can speak out against extremism.
- As the UN has primary responsibility for conflict resolution, the focus with G20 nations should be on issues such as arms trade, military spending, and the cost of conflict, where G20 nations have primary impact.
- Faith leaders can and should object to immoral wars and conflict. No one organization can stop conflicts—interfaith communities must work together.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

The Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) breakout session focused on what IF20 should be trying to communicate to the G20 process about FoRB, including what G20 leaders should know, worry about, and prioritize. Discrepancies between national laws regarding FoRB and actual practice needs to be addressed.

- FoRB is so integral to social cohesion that it may be time for the General Assembly or Security Council of the UN to request an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice confirming the customary law status of FoRB as recognized by Article 18 in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as allowed by Article 96 of the UN Charter.
- Religious freedom is inexorably connected to human rights—if this deepest of human feelings is not respected, then freedom of expression, assembly, etc. are also abused. FoRB must be legal, legitimate, and proportionate.
- Rights are connected to duties; we must not only demand freedom but ask for religious social responsibility, similar to corporate social responsibility.
- If faith communities are using all their energy to protect themselves or fight to protect their freedoms, their capacity and potential for good can be diverted. Countries that protect FoRB have better societal outcomes in a statistically significant way.
- International organizations should reassess the repression of FoRB under the excuse of “security” after 9/11.
- Recognizing that from a global perspective, all religions are minority religions (and often suffer repression at least somewhere in the world, the shared experience of persecution should be tapped to catalyze greater concern to protect FoRB everywhere.

PLENARY SESSIONS: DAY 2

LESSONS LEARNED FROM COVID

The day began with a recap of the events and takeaways from Day 1 of the Forum. This was followed by a panel discussion on lessons learned from the COVID crisis, how it has transformed our world, and where we go next. Among the lessons are the mobilizing power of religious leaders and faith-based institutions at the grassroots level, where initiatives have often worked more effectively than top-down approaches. Religious communities have proved their value as an indispensable asset, building on high levels of trust and ability to mobilize communities. The picture is

of course mixed, with some problematic impact in places, for example where religious actors have been promoted anti-vaccine sentiments. Respecting differences of belief, policy makers and religious actors need to work together to find optimal areas of synergy.

The Faiths for Vaccines initiative presented evidence of the effectiveness of multi-sectoral responses to crisis, where faith works hand-in-hand with government in a spirit of collaboration rather than control. Panelists called for governments to engage with and invest in local, faith-based actors as critical and long-term partners in healthcare, with thoughtful strategies for cross-sectoral engagement and flexible funding architecture. With their new connections to innovation and technology, religious leaders are in a better place than ever to help.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS: DAY 2

EDUCATION

The education breakout session focused on educational priorities to consider moving forward and how holistic wellbeing should be integrated into education.

- We need better interconnectedness in educational systems to address children's social, psychosocial, and spiritual needs—as demonstrated by the mental health crisis that is only beginning to be understood post-pandemic.
- COVID helped expand the reach of education through technology, and though tech cannot replicate in-person learning, it can deepen the reach of education globally.
- Religious literacy, multireligious literacy, inter-religious dialogue, and inter-worldview literacy should be integrated into classrooms, with each type of literacy varying in intensity and frequency depending on the context and school.
- Arguments for education with the G20 can best include a financial viewpoint. There has been a \$29-65K loss of income over the lifetime of a child due to learning loss in the US. Every dollar invested in holistic wellbeing and social/mental health has a \$11 return in economic output.

- Education's impact on the Global Peace Index, Global Wellbeing Index, Global Good Life Index, etc. should be examined, in addition to the work it does at the preventative level regarding societal problems.
- We must better unpack the language of Article 27 on the Rights of the Child to defend the socio-emotional-spiritual aspect of holistic education.

HEALTH SYSTEM REFORM

Discussion on health system reform focused on priority changes in global health systems and how faith actors can contribute to improving them, especially in light of recent lessons learned from the COVID pandemic.

- The pandemic revealed huge gaps in healthcare systems across the world—especially in Africa, where more people died of other diseases than COVID during the pandemic due to lack of access to care and help.
- Faith partnerships with governments in healthcare should not be arrangements desperately sought for in emergencies. They need to be well-integrated.
- COVID highlighted rampant inequity and disparities in healthcare education and access.
- Faith leaders can be effective messengers in combatting misinformation and leading by example, especially if they're included at the table.

SOCIAL PROTECTION AND HUMANITARIAN REFORM

The Social Protection and Humanitarian Reform breakout session focused on vulnerabilities people across the globe face due to the polycrisis and how systems can be changed to render better assistance, and bridge gaps between faith-based and governmental efforts.

- Climate, COVID, and conflict amount to a perfect storm for the refugee crisis, with 100M refugees, displaced persons, and migrants across the world. Children are the most vulnerable. If one counts 6.5 Billion people of faith in the world, that's 65 people of faith to each refugee. That's tremendous power to help.

- Governments and global organizations (World Bank, etc.) can be blind to the monetary side of religious response efforts to COVID-19 and more, perhaps just viewing it as charity. We need better data to show the mass mobilization of religious humanitarian work.
- In Ukraine, 106 social protection programs have started since the start of the war, mostly by faith-based actors.
- Cash is not enough—we need cash plus care. Social protection is essential.
- We must think ahead and fireproof our communities, helping those without social protection now, so they don't become tomorrow's migrants.

CLOSING PLENARY SESSIONS

AGENDAS FOR 2023

The concluding sessions explored themes and priorities for the IF20 looking ahead. A central topic was the strategic position of interfaith bodies in influencing and achieving G20 agendas, the role of religion in protecting human dignity (including protecting the rights of children, the displaced, and refugees), and the urgent need for action on climate. There were repeated calls to strengthen interfaith relationships, commitment, and collaboration, better utilizing SDG 17 to build meaningful partnerships between civil society and governments—not just globally, but starting from the bottom up by getting religious actors in each G20 country involved locally.



“Solving all these crises is not just wishful thinking—it’s critical to our societies and our communities, and we need to bring these needs before G20 leadership. The time for lukewarm action and half-hearted solutions is past.”

– His Eminence Metropolitan Emmanuel

CLOSING REMARKS

The Interfaith Alliance and G20 Interfaith Association leadership offered closing remarks. They honored and thanked the partners whose efforts and generosity made the gathering possible, then presented concluding ideas. A framework was the “Four C’s” that demand attention: COVID, Climate, Conflict, and Children.

Looking forward to 2023, the plan is to engage in work with smaller, focused meetings on local levels in order to start early in the process, connect more with people on the ground, and better utilize the platform’s great potential for involving multiple G20 countries.

“Revelation means removing the veil—and COVID did that with inequalities during the pandemic. We’ve lost tremendous ground on the SDGs. We’re seeing an increase in conflict. We’re seeing challenges in education. We’re seeing an increase in refugees and the displaced. And then there’s the climate crisis surrounding it all. But this is a Kairos moment, and there is hope.”

– Professor Katherine Marshall



2022 POLICY BRIEFS

1. Refugees and Forced Migration: Religious dimensions
2. Contemporary Food Crises: Religious dimensions
3. A G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief
4. Interfaith Action to Protect Rainforests
5. COVID-19 Emergencies: Revitalizing Religious Partnerships
6. Anti-Racism Initiative: An International Commission of Inquiry on Racism and
7. Discriminatory Policies and Practices



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