

## **A View from Geneva: Exploring International Polycrises and the G20 Interfaith Forum**

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It's always illuminating to review familiar topics from an alternative angle. Cole Durham and I (as President and Vice President of the G20 Interfaith Forum) returned from an intensive week of meetings in Geneva in early March sobered, as the unfolding Middle East crisis compounded a sense of vertigo amidst multiple crises, yet heartened by a determination to keep hope alive and a broad willingness to jettison conventional ideas and to look ahead, across sectors, generations, and locations. Among "pearls" of wisdom was a sense that any lingering confidence in "business as usual" approaches has vanished. Fresh thinking is more needed than ever, especially thinking tied to action. Yet, as one wise person noted, we don't need to reinvent the wheel: some values, practices, and institutions, like wheels, work generally well and are useful and needed. It's more the assumptions about uses and above all the interactions of networks that need to be rethought and revamped.

The Geneva visit's purpose was to explore central challenges, priority topics, and different networks centered on the G20 Interfaith Forum and especially our programs for 2026 and 2027. That took us to partners ranging from the World Council of Churches, the World Health Organization, the World Economic Forum, and Arigatou International to Globethics and the ACT Alliance. We also focused on the United Nations Human Rights Council meetings, where the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)—[Nazila Ghanea](#)—delivered her annual report, and attended meetings of the [Article 18 Alliance](#), thus integrating hopes and concerns on religious freedom into broader global policy considerations.

This brief note focuses on one among our many meetings, with colleagues from key networks. It was organized by Maria Lucia Uribe ([Arigatou International](#)) on March 5 (in collaboration with [Globethics](#) and the [LDS Geneva team](#)) and centered explicitly on the G20 Interfaith Forum agendas.

The meeting's agenda centered on the G20 Interfaith Forum's (IF20) objectives, notably the aim of supporting the array of religiously inspired institutions and alliances working for peace, development, and humanitarian relief. This took us to discussions about what we mean by stressing that the IF20's aim is to serve as a "network of networks", linking and amplifying the work of religious communities, scholars, and civil society actors in broad international policy discussions. We traced the story of the Forum's evolution since it began in 2014, and the current focus on learning about and distilling the extraordinary wisdom and experience of religious communities, as an integral part of the G20's roles in shaping global agendas.

The Geneva community is intensely focused on the contemporary "polycrises" and their practical and ethical perspectives. As the discussion situated the G20 within a broader geopolitical and governance context (more than as an isolated policy forum), underlying questions centered on the US 2026 presidency and its objectives, and on how interfaith actors might play a more strategic role in shaping global debates through the G20 process. It also looked to the continuing G20 process, with the UK 2027 presidency in prospect. A common theme was that IF20 engagement should go well beyond symbolic participation, striving to contribute substantively to policy discussions. This must be grounded in ethical and theological reflection and bring forward concrete proposals that draw on the wide range of pertinent religious experience. Among suggestions was work to deepen the theological and ethical foundations that underpin the IF20's initiatives and to link them in the context of engagement and cooperation. None of us can

continue doing business as usual, but even in a period of extraordinary uncertainty and change, the IF20 can and must build on existing initiatives and networks, not attempting to “reinvent the wheel”, or to rebuild from scratch. The central challenge is thus how to connect, amplify, and coordinate these efforts more effectively and to build on synergies and mutual learning.

We heard a keen awareness of the complex global landscape within which participants live daily. Among suggested actions proposed was broadening traditional alliances and partnerships. Many middle-income countries face increasing economic pressure and need to be integrated better in traditional development thinking and alliances. Decentralization of aid is still more important aspect of the changing landscape of development cooperation. Humanitarian and development institutions and faith-based and faith-inspired organizations clearly need to respond to social challenges and agendas with less funding and increasing geopolitical concerns and pressures, but it’s simply not enough to stick to “do more with less”. New thinking and approaches are essential. The breakdowns in international legal frameworks and norms and, still more broadly, the principles underpinning multilateral cooperation that many decry demand deeply rooted rethinking, especially of political agendas.

Among challenges that preoccupy both the Geneva community and the IF20 are the well documented shortfalls in planned progress towards in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are marked by their clear deadlines and specific targets. With the 2030 deadline approaching for the SDGs overall, what could and should come next? This is the right time, it was argued, to consider and plan for a next SDG phase, taking into account more explicitly than in the past the roles of faith communities.

Specific challenges for the 2026 G20 Presidency of the United States were discussed. The US government is explicitly downplaying topics that faith communities have traditionally emphasized: equity, sustainability, social justice, and climate change for example. The announced agendas focusing on economic growth, energy security and technology and AI (plus trade) do open space for significant engagement, alongside issues that the IF20 has addressed over the years, notably human trafficking, corruption, food and hunger, debt relief, children and education, and women’s roles. Thus the IF20 faces the challenge of constructive and principled engagement on the full range of issues as well as their interconnections in an admittedly difficult environment. Among other issues woven through the discussions were rising regressive agendas in many parts of the world, declining trust in democratic institutions, and polarization and fragmentation in global governance systems.

The planned IF20 2026 agenda will draw on several ongoing policy reviews that take stock of prior work, contemporary challenges, and above all the experience and ideals of network partners. A May 2026 meeting at Georgetown University in Washington DC will review draft papers and launch discussion of key issues. The October IF20 meeting in Salt Lake City will deepen discussion of these issues and allow discussion of a wider range of issues on the the G20 agenda and beyond.

Even within the constraints of formal political spaces, the IF20 and interfaith networks can work to shape agendas in a variety of ways. Geneva meeting participants emphasized that influencing global agendas involves not only governments. Engaging grassroots communities and bottom-up approaches are more important than ever. Outreach to financial institutions, technology companies, major corporations, global investors, and philanthropic actors is feasible and important, and many individuals within these sectors have strong religious beliefs and affiliations, and are motivated by associated ethical values. Engaging wider networks more intentionally could open important avenues for influence. A recurring theme was the

importance of language and framing of both issues and objectives. Framing some development issues in terms of security and stability might, for example, resonate better with certain policymakers. This should not mean abandoning ethical principles, but rather translating ethical concerns into policy-relevant frameworks and language.

Suggestions for strengthening the IF20's roles included:

- Encouraging a wider network of leaders in influential sectors to become part of IF20 networks
- Capitalizing on dialogue spaces that include leaders from finance and technology sectors
- More deliberate efforts to build bridges among faith communities and economic decision-makers
- Seeking avenues for faith inspired networks to engage more structured way with formal policy groups and institutional processes
- Developing communications campaigns that highlight contributions of religious communities to specific global challenges
- Work to shape key messages that resonate with policymakers and broader audiences
- Showcase concrete examples of how faith actors contribute to peace, stability, and development
- And, always, to include in meaningful ways both young people and women.

An interesting theme, “religious global responsibility”, focuses on a framing that looks to overall objectives of the IF20. It suggests inter alia rethinking relationships, for example in a focus on prosperity and flourishing. Consensus (seen globally) on many issues affecting humanity seems to have weakened, as have understandings of collaboration, demanding new models of working and engagement. “Religious global responsibility”, in parallel with a counterpart of “corporate social responsibility” suggests a focus on foundational principles as the central ethical underpinning of development and international collaboration.

In short, the challenges for the IF20 today loom large, but we stand to benefit from the ideas and active support of deeply committed and thoughtful partners who share a keen, deep interest in and commitment to common goals and objectives. We must avoid the traps of “no action, talk only” (abbreviated by some as “NATO”) and focus on CART (Creative Action and Results Together). But a central “bottom line” is that, in a fragmented geopolitical environment, religious actors can and need to play constructive roles by emphasizing ethical reflection, community knowledge, and moral determination in global governance debates. This demands deeper strategic thinking, broader alliances with influential actors, stronger communication and visibility strategies, and translating ethical concerns and unpacking faith-inspired wisdom and experience into policy-relevant language and frameworks. As always, listening and learning are central to the challenge. IF20 can help bridge local inspiration and initiative with broader agendas, contributing to better solutions for all.

## **Changing the Narrative and Increasing Visibility**

Participants noted that many important stories of faith-based engagement are not reaching political decision-makers. This suggests the need for a stronger and more strategic and agile communications and visibility strategy.

Possible approaches discussed included:

Participants emphasized that improving visibility is not only about communication but also about demonstrating the financial and human influence and reach of religious communities, particularly their ability to mobilize networks and engage communities at scale.

Another important dimension of communication is storytelling. Stories from communities can help translate complex policy issues into more accessible narratives. Young people were identified as particularly important actors in this process.

Youth engagement can contribute by:

- Helping translate policy debates into clear and relatable language
- Bringing new creativity and communication tools to interfaith engagement.

## **Questions About Representation and Legitimacy**

Participants also reflected critically on the role of interfaith platforms and faith-based organizations: Are current interfaith initiatives and faith-based organizations legitimate representatives of faith communities? How can religious voices move from symbolic participation to real influence?

The discussion concluded with reflections on the need to rethink mechanisms of collaboration and influence.