

Work in progress and under revision



G20 Interfaith Forum

Bringing Faith and Policy Together

G20i Regional Recommendations

Asia

The Asia Pacific region is one of multicultural diversity with a richness of history, tradition, culture, religion and age. There is a diversity of age and gender that underscores what has been called the ‘sleeping giant’ of the world. Yet as much as there is a potential, there is equally a weakness in this diversity with many countries within the region, facing internal conflict on identity, engagement with religious and ethnic minorities and a growing elderly and youth population.

Different stakeholders (such as Humanitarian agencies, research institutes and academics) are of the same opinion that existing inequalities will magnify the primary and secondary impacts of COVID-19. The impacts of COVID-19 severely compromise formal and informal protection mechanisms and in contexts where they are already scarce, individuals and communities' access to safety and protection drastically deteriorates. The closing down of vital institutions such as schools, and lifesaving services such as community gathering spaces or safe shelters limits access to help for those experiencing violence. The expected global recession will directly affect women more severely as they are over-represented in all sectors of the informal labour market such as in South Asia, as well as many occupations within the formal labour market which cannot be done remotely. In many parts of Asia, they are the frontline nurses, doctors, shop assistants and cleaners. They are often also from ethnic minority communities which can perpetuate additional vulnerabilities. Increased childcare and other unpaid work for women have also increased in other health emergencies, preventing women's

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return to the labor market in the aftermath. The recession is also predicted to affect younger people's participation in the labor market and a disruption in education.

Almost 1.3 billion learners are currently out-of-school as a result of the country-wide or localized closures of educational institutions forced by the Covid-19 adding up to the hundreds of millions of young people that were already out-of-school. This situation seriously risks exacerbating already existing vulnerabilities to access education services and other learning opportunities and could lead to a generation being out of education in the future. Prolonged closures of educational institutions are likely to increase drop-out rates which will disproportionately affect adolescent girls, further entrench gender gaps in education and lead to increased risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, early pregnancy, and early and forced marriage. Such closures also increase the risk of child labor and recruitment by armed groups and pose a serious threat in terms of malnutrition for those families who relied on school feeding programs. The number of separated and unaccompanied minors as well as of child-headed households may also rise as elder care givers are at high risk of mortality from the virus – especially in places where public health and social measures (e.g., physical distancing, quarantine) are simply not possible.

The recommendations covered the following themes:

Education, gender and youth

Protecting the Planet: Practical Partnerships to Address Environmental Challenges

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Education, gender and youth

Background

The topics of education, gender and youth are interlinked in a variety of ways. Separately and in conjunction, they require attention if Asia is indeed to harness its century of growth and progress. Success in education attainment is noteworthy in Asia. However, there remain concerns about quality that reflect in low learning levels, inadequate practical competencies such as literacy and numeracy that keep Asians especially in South Asia in poverty traps. While certain measures are seeking to redress these problems, there is also increasingly a concern that education quality is beyond questions of practical competencies only, and equally about establishing connectedness, communication, exchange and sharing for harnessing education's capacity not only for quantitative attainment, but also, and equally for enhancing human capital to meet complex challenges of the contemporary world. Thus, questions of holistic content, pedagogy, delivery, capacity building of teachers, amongst others, become very important. Education quality and delivery have a direct bearing on youth matters in Asia, where transition between education and employment is one of the biggest obstacles facing the youth in the region. Consequently, the region sees an increasing number of disaffected youths being associated with urban crime, ethnic violence and political unrest. Part of the reason why youth are prone to "risky" behavior stems from education attainment and quality, but also because for cultural and political reasons, youth are not given center in voicing their concerns and aspiration. Questions of education attainment, quality and inadequate voices lead us strongly to the question of gender equality and how men and women are implicated in that in Asia. While according to the four sub-indexes outlined by the Global Gender Gap Index, the largest gender disparity is the political empowerment gap, gender disparity is deeper rooted and starts very early in the lifecycles of men and women. Consequently, the relative gaps between Asian men and women on measures of health, education, economy and politics are not improving sufficiently. Discrimination begins at birth, and girl preferences still dominating in parts of Asia, South Asia and the Pacific. Disparity in education attainment remains high. Discontinued education for the girl child often spells early marriage, early childbirth and poor post-natal and reproductive health for young women. Men and women are subjected to violence, and women continue to endure sexual harassment, sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Political participation and subsequently women's ability to demand rights for their protection in the private and public spheres becomes compromised.

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The Challenge

Shortfalls of the current policy: International educational policy discourse has shifted from the decades-old conditional and cost-benefit analyses of schooling encapsulated in the human capital theory and rate of return analyses to rights-based approach emphasizing marginalized and hard to reach populations, viewing access to schooling/education as a fundamental feature of human and citizenship rights. This rights-based approach to education has manifested through several policy instruments such as Education for All (EFA) (1990 and 2000), the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals (2000, 2015). As the various layers of SDG 4 demonstrates, education attainment is linked to other points of the SDG, especially as education seeks equitable coverage (SDG 4.5) and education content and delivery mode that promotes values of sustainable development and global citizenship (SDG 4.7). To these ends, questions of cohesive education and avenues and institutional imperatives that offer are to be highlighted as important. However, the Asia region has been slow to focus in on these substantive matters of quality and content. The numbers of literacy and numeracy deficient are staggering, where Asia houses the highest numbers of illiterate youth, women and adults. There is cultural variation in understanding the key elements in SDG 4.7, and countries in the Asia Pacific have actively incorporated some elements, such as CSE in Thailand and climate education partnership in the Pacific Islands, peace education, mainstreaming social cohesion by promoting gender equality and non-violence in education. However, there is scope to assess if faith traditions have been brought to bear on these processes and if so, what the nature of that deliberation is. SDG 4.7 leads quite directly to the questions of youth and gender equality, notably through its interconnectedness with SDG 16 and 5. While many initiatives have been promised by nation states, and the importance of youth upholding values of tolerance and cohesion is appreciated, there remains scope to further the work where youth are engaged in interfaith action towards cohesion and peace, creating safe spaces for reflection on challenges and aspirations. Last but not least, progress has also been slow in SDG 5, with low levels of women in decision-making. Raising the voices of women and the youth, thus, become important policy imperatives.

In these policy shortfalls, especially as they concern education, youth and gender, religion is an important cultural determinant of success. According to a Pew Research study from 2012, 8 in 10 people still identify with a religion. In many parts of Asia, religious ideals also determine norms and what should constitute the contents of education. While religion and religious actors may appear solely culpable of impeding progressive values, in fact, conservative norms of gender and ethno-religious cohesion often inform nationalist agendas of sovereignty and security. Thus, it is important to mobilize religion and faith actors to think about policy goals and processes. Research shows that ‘conservative’ faith actors find aspects of SDG 5 threatening for seeming to contradict certain norms about men and women’s roles, as well as for the perception that it fails to promote the proper place

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of sexual relationships as only being within heterosexual marriages. Both goal 16 ('peace and justice') and 17 ('partnership for the goals') were also seen as difficult on account of religious particularisms sometimes getting in the way of dialogue and collaboration. Thus, in all three areas, religious actors can play a positive role towards better outcomes for equality, justice and cohesion.

Recommendations on Education

1. There needs to be greater religious and spiritual literacy that is culturally nuanced and based in ethics, moral and historical stories.
2. Such religious literacy needs to be grounded in faith and inter-faith perspectives, and not solely in a "secular" humanistic one. The inter-faith angle must mean that the idea of any religion as the "best" must be discarded as a starting premise for instruction in religious studies.
3. As a part of an inter-faith approach, experiential learning must be incorporated into the pedagogy by way of opening up spaces that bridge the gap between religious and secular perspectives, and adherents of different faith traditions.
4. There must be transparency and vetting around the curriculum and text book writing process that determines how religion and ethics are taught in historically relevant, culturally sensitive and humanistically capacious ways.
5. There has to be adequate teachers and high-quality teacher training that aligns teacher preparation with desired outcomes of instruction in religious studies.

Recommendations on Youth

1. Youth need to be educated towards tolerance, beyond religious practice and towards effective non-verbal communication such as mindfulness, mindful language.
2. Youth need to be familiar with global issues and priorities- such as transnationalism, displacement, refugee concerns and citizenship rights.

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3. Youth voices must receive centre stage where their perspectives, aspirations and challenges are actively solicited by policy makers.
4. Create avenues for youth participation in research, activism and internships so that they know how to engage real life situations and negotiate challenges productively and meaningfully.

Recommendations on Gender

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

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Protecting the Planet: Practical Partnerships to Address Environmental Challenges

Background

Background

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

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

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

The Challenge

Religious communities, more often than not, naturally have an innate calling to help humanity and inspire positive action within their followers, due to their teachings of truth, love and unity. This is why there are many faith-based organizations that serve the purpose of awareness raising, capacity building and education within communities. When it comes to protecting the planet and the environment, different regions face different challenges, and religious scholars in areas of poverty or social unrest, may not consider the environment as a top priority when the link between social issues and the environment may not be understood by all faith leaders. The environment is inextricably

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linked to all humanitarian issues, from youth and women in India, to human trafficking in Indonesia, and to world peace. Furthermore, in many religions the natural world is even considered as a living being. These foundational principles and beliefs must be built upon with practical steps and concrete action.

Active consideration of environmental issues and challenges by religious groups should be made a priority, but in association with both governments and a variety of grassroots level organizations. Broadening our horizon of responsibility with a focus on care will be important to change behaviors and instigate long-lasting and sustainable change.

Recommendations

1. Partnerships

1. Promote partnerships between faith-based organisations and both grassroots level and policy level organisations working on environmental issues. Partnerships must be formed between FBOs and those working on the environment to ensure that religious scholars, actors and leaders build their knowledge and capacity to be able to properly and effectively impact, influence and advocate for the environment. Those working to promote environmental sustainability will also benefit from community support and behaviour change that ensues when working more closely with faith leaders and organisations. We must not limit ourselves to ecological theology, the focus must be on results based partnerships and action.
2. Promote collaboration between faith-based organisations and educational and environmental institutions to ensure that environmental education is offered in all schools and programmes. Education is paramount to tackling the issue of protecting the planet. Many organisations are already working in education but it is important to ensure that this includes an environmental education including the SDGs. This move towards a more values based approach, including ethical thinking, feeling and acting, to make youth more aware of and connected to the environment is essential.
3. Promote partnerships between faith-based organisations and organisations working with marginalised communities, especially youth-based. Our faith leaders and faith-based organisations educate not only in schools but in communities. The world of faith must harness their power and influence to ensure that they are properly educating our communities on how to live sustainably. Faith leaders should partner together with the appropriate grassroots organisations to ensure that FBO-led community advocacy and education reaches all groups and their families.

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4. Religious organisations must do proper due diligence and advocate for change in governments and organisations who are harming our environment. Religious organisations must use their power of advocacy to change the way that our governments are working, to change the way that business is working and to combat environmental destruction. Clear guidelines should be devised to best help faith leaders leverage their influence.
5. Religious leaders should work hand in hand with agricultural organisations and with government policy around agriculture and farming. The impact of both animal agriculture - the livestock industry - as well as other forms of non-eco-friendly agriculture are primary causes of much of the environmental destruction that is happening. FBOs must reach out and work with agricultural and farming organisations to advocate for sustainable agricultural practices.
6. Form intergovernmental partnerships. The G20 could partner with the institutions that train religious leaders and increase the centrality of protection of the planet in their education.

2. Policy

1. Policy makers should embrace the 'green faith' movement; partner with it, work with it and make it part of their environmental programmes. All of our organisations must be courageous and empowered to really speak out when the planet is threatened. The 'green faith' campaign should become a global movement, not just of the religious organisations but from policy organisations down. The concept of theology isn't enough, it really needs to be joined with action and inspire compassionate awareness, connection and responsibility.
2. Expand the definition of SDG-16 'promote peaceful and inclusive societies' to include peace towards nature (ecology of peace). All organisations working on SDG-16 must ensure that they are also working on the environment. Ecology and the environment should be included by governments in a new definition of peace and creating peaceful societies - we have been acting for too long as if we are at war with nature. The new definition of peace needs to include the right to a healthy environment (clean water, air, etc.). Societies cannot be peaceful if there is a toxic and unhealthy environment stemming from a toxic relationship with our environment. Climate change, environmental degradation and unsustainable consumption of natural resources is the cause of many conflicts and this connection should be highlighted.

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3. Ensure that FBOs advocate for greater rights for the environment in line with indigenous traditions' view of the earth as a living Mother. We must encourage governments to expand the consideration and effect of environmental impacts in their policies and programmes. The environment should not be a separate issue with regard to government policy, but an integrated aspect as it is the foundation which supports all lives and systems - it is interwoven with education, business, security and so much more. Giving the natural environment greater rights, such as that of a living being when approaching policy discussions will improve environmental outcomes.

4. Promote good governance with recognition and awards. In order to promote good governance, religious institutions could give prizes or awards to governments who are doing the best in this regard of an integrated approach to the environment. Hopefully this would in another way inspire our governments to really take up the cause of the environment in a critical way.

3. Capacity Building

1. Build the capacity of faith-based organisations as much as possible. Faith-based organisations often operate under limited resources and often underinvest in the capacity building of their teams. The world of faith actors, leaders and organisations needs to partner with capacity building and training organisations to be advocating effectively.

2. Recognise, acknowledge and learn from the work of grassroots FBOs. Many FBOs are working on the ground in sustainable, eco-friendly ways, so it is very important for them to share this with others. Guidelines for best practice should be put together, summarising the knowledge and experience of these organisations. Lessons can be given to other religious organisations and all other stakeholders to promote the importance of faith-based approaches. An improved evidence base for behaviour and perception change in communities should also assist faith leaders to follow best practice, which may include working with scientists and behaviour change experts to track impact.

3. Map our existing capacities to act on environmental problems. Capacity expert groups should be created on specific environmental issues to also lobby and advocate to the government as well as companies or factories. Through mapping out the changemakers and visionaries within

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the community and the populations they serve, support can be more easily mobilised when it is needed.

4. Action of FBOs

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

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