**G20 Interfaith Forum 2020, Thursday, October 15**

**Education that supports peace, religious literacy, and cultural diversity** (PD07**)**

**Moderator**: Prof. Patrice Brodeur, Senior Advisor at The International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID)

**Speakers:**

1. Dr. Scherto Gill, Research Fellow at the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace and Visiting Fellow at the School of Education, University of Sussex Dr. Mohammad Abdelfadeel, University of al-Azhar; KAICIID Fellow
2. Dr. Fahad bin Sultan Al-Sultan, Executive Director of Salam for Cultural Communication, Saudi Arabia
3. Rev. Prof. Dr. Fadi Daou, Chairperson and CEO of Adyan Foundation
4. Dr. Samia Huq, Associate Professor and Interim Dean School of Humanities and Social Science at BRACU University, Dhaka
5. Dr. Mohammed Abdel Rahem, University of al-Azhar (KAICIID Fellow),
6. Prof. Priyankar Upadhaya, UNESCO Chair for Peace and Intercultural Understanding at Banaras Hindu University, India
7. Prof. Tom Banchoff, Vice President for Global Engagement at Georgetown University
8. Amb. David Fernandez Puyana, Permanent Observer at the United Nations University for Peace (UPEACE) to the United Nations in Geneva
9. Dr. Wendy Yee Mee Tien, Senior Lecturer and Director for the Center for Internship Training and Academic Enrichment at the University of Malaya, Malaysia

This two-hour panel discussion, focused on education, was moderated by Patrice Brodeur, affiliated both with KAICIID and the University of Montreal, with nine speakers. It explored a wide range of topics centered on the teaching of, but also about, religion, in the context of today’s multiple overlapping crises linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. It related questions about religious literacy to broader understandings of citizenship and the benefits of cultural diversity, focusing on the responsibilities of and avenues for influence of religious communities, scholars, and leaders in their societies. To enhance inclusive social cohesion in any society, strong linked between religious communities and various government policy-makers are essential. Teaching about cultural diversity, including religious diversity, especially through lived experience of inclusive diversity was urged as a fundamental right for each child. There was a forthright recognition of sensitivities and complexities involved in the topic, many of which arise from real differences of approaches, some linked to differing understandings about the roles of religious education, questions about how to teach values, including whose values, and the inevitable political links. The hope that emerged was that broad teaching about different religions can reinforce positive understandings of diversity without negating or favoring the approaches of any single religious tradition or secular worldview.

Important background for the discussion was the ongoing work of the task force/working group on education, led by Dr. Scherto Gill, who was the first speaker, and the policy brief prepared in that context, which can be found in the G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Briefs website. The introductory comments highlighted the broad challenges of inclusive education, extending well beyond simple access to a culture of inclusion that should permeate all aspects of educational systems, including but also beyond formal institutions.

The panelists included leaders from different institutions and countries that are grappling with the issues so there was a stimulating balance between theoretical considerations and on-the-ground opportunities and challenges, including navigating significant sensitivities and political interests. The gaps between aspirations and goals and reality and the continuing reality of wide disparities in access to and quality of education were underlying themes. Related experience was cited notably from the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, the Arab world more broadly, Bangladesh, Egypt, India, the United States, Malaysia, and the UN University, as well as one question from Nigeria from a participant. A challenging and recurring question asked whether education was a product or reflection of the broader society or whether, in contrast, it shapes the society and political environment, and who has access to education, not to mention IT resources and Internet access for newer online forms of education. Specific objectives of the panelists included enriching understandings of cultural diversity but also contesting discrimination and negative attitudes towards “others” in a society. The session’s outcome focused on a common will to pursue dialogue on the topic as well as specific and implementable ideas, for example to develop a simple module that could be taught worldwide focused on an interfaith text.

The following are highlights of each initial presentation, a conversation among panelists, and responses to audience questions.

**Dr. Scherto Gill,** Research Fellow at the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace and Visiting Fellow at the School of Education, University of Sussex

* This panel and the G20 Interfaith Forum offer an important space for a most timely dialogue. It responds to two aspirations. First, the G20 presidency, and second the raison d’être of the G20 Interfaith Forum, which center on lived values and the ways they are heard and understood,
* The education task force (ongoing work and draft policy brief addressed to the G20) includes inter alia the Aga Khan Network, Arigatou International, and other leaders in the field. In the SDG context, interfaith organizations have worked to empower communities to close gaps, notably during the COVID lockdowns and to meet the needs of children.
* The task force has focused on lessons learned from research and member experience about priorities for education. A central point that is innovative and pertinent is that from an interfaith perspective, inclusion iinvolves more than access to education and should be understood as nurturing the whole child.
* An interfaith perspective should center on love, respect, humility, nurturing the view that human diversity is to be celebrated, enhance pedagogical approach
* It demonstrates that embracing inclusion must be an integral, whole system process.
* Three policy priorities: (a) Advancing wellbeing of every child in inclusive learning environments; (b) Teacher training; and (c) Interreligious dialogue and participation.
* Connecting learning to students’ lived environment is a central priority.
* Education holds the cure to the overall problems facing us all, thus finding solutions for our education systems is vital, to nurture the wellbeing of all.

**Dr. Fahad bin Sultan Al-Sultan,** Executive Director of Salam for Cultural Communication, Saudi Arabia

* Honored that Saudi Arabia is hosting the Forum. Like a small parliament bringing many together. Offers a benchmark for cohesion.
* Situation in Arab world: dire need to incorporate principles of social cohesion. Conflict, racism, discrimination. Reflected in a grave way, has affected development. Coexistence, acceptance of cultural diversity is a necessity.
* Are educational institutions capable of fulfilling these important roles? Education is interactive with environment, culture, society. A long debated philosophical issue: can education change society or vice versa? “I believe schools are a product of society, cultural and religious.” Our main mission is raising awareness at political, cultural, and social levels. Religion affects stereotypical views. Need reforms in structure of educational system. Need more cooperation.
* Responsibility is not solely with schools. Are many platforms on social media that also take part. Need to take this well into account.
* Another challenge is cultural identity and global citizenship. There are problematic views about these concepts. Many conferences on global citizenship, common values where similar questions are always raised. Difficulties in understanding these concepts. Aim to have human beings living and coexisting together. Arab world one of the most diverse and should be highlighting this diversity

**Rev. Prof. Dr. Fadi Daou,** Chairperson and CEO of Adyan Foundation, Lebanon

* Need to focus on social cohesion; education plays major role especially on inclusion and literacy.
* International community of decision makers in relation to education: we all need to advocate more and more to make cultural and religious literacy a right for every child. Realistic criticism of Dr. Al-Sultan. What does quality and diversity mean? Make it an educational right.
* Level of governments: decision makers need to do lots of work. Need to ensure that education is free from discrimination. Be realistic, lots of work to do in Arab region and globally. More than half of governments promote nationalism that excludes some groups. Inclusive education requires inclusive governance. Huge challenge. Need to make space for more diversity in society.
* Educational community, senior experts who contribute to educational theories and methodologies, especially in relation to cultural diversity. Need for more collaboration, to develop a concept of diversity that takes into account intercultural and interreligious experience. All forms of education are involved. Learn to understand diversity of humanity. Need to do more. Develop theory as experience, not just knowledge.
* Religious communities in many situations fear each other. Afraid when exposed to other knowledge. Not nurturing fear and hatred. Example of Lebanon. Defined common values. Program around shared values. Three years of negotiation.
* Cultural and religious literature is a right for each human being, necessity for sustainable peace.

**Dr. Samia Huq,** Associate Professor and Interim Dean School of Humanities and Social Science at BRACU University, Dhaka

* Her entry point is as a South Asian, Muslim. Bangladesh struggles with paradoxes around its Muslim identity and the framing of the country by its constitution as secular.
* Religious identity intertwined with post-colonial history, relationship with India and others. Known for progress. Identity subsumed within broader questions of socio-economic development. Over 20 years of outcomes.
* Religious literacy: content and quality are both important. How do progressive communities understand religion? The teaching of religion as distinct from teaching about religion is important. Teaching should not press for acceptance or adherence to a single tradition. Should come with recognition of problems. Teaching religious interconnections can, however, create suspicions, seen as forced secularization. Fears that religious values will be lost. Does teaching of religion in public schools have to be detached from belief? Not solely humanistic. Capacious possibilities of religious literacy. Look at religious textbooks, only teach own traditions. Exclusivist. Dearth of other experience. Religious teaching less prioritized.
* Examples across Asia of different approaches. Deliberative, collaborative approaches. Peace education. Importance of partnership, away from siloed.
* In Bangladesh, some do scriptural reasoning. Experiential practices, merit further light.
* Educators and religious actors can provide support to training of teachers. Vital to have trained teachers. Inclusive governance is vital, on how religion and ethics are taught. Mobilized to interfaith action.

**Dr. Mohammed Abdel Rahem**, University of al-Azhar (KAICIID Fellow),

* Short overview of Al-Azhar; oldest Sunni Islam institution in the world, many departments. Resaerch Academy, translations, department for education of foreign scholars. 40,000 students from more than 40 countries. Al-Azhar Observatory to fight extremism
* Facing terrorist attacks and publication of false information; asked or forced to deal with this threat to the whole world.
* Need to find answers to these misunderstandings, stand up against hate speech, especially on social media, revise textbooks, reform educational curricula. In past years created Azhar observatory, Center also to fight false Fatwas, distribute information. Issued set of books, Islamic culture to stand up against extremist ideas what might be propagated among schools, university students. Modern undetstandings: speak about diversity, citizenship, religious cooperation.
* University tries to find link between religious and other world views. Called religious culture. Also comprises problems which people might face in their everyday lives. Jihad, expiation, Caliphate, understanding of Hijra, atheism. Can inhibit, prevent all endeavors, desires, devil, clearly state no other person should be declared as an atheist.
* Whole chapter on ethics of dialogue, citizenship, correct understanding of Islam. Common citizenship is a pillar of Islam. Tolerance of Islam towards other believers. TV program, family watching news on TV, terrorist attack on tourist bus.

**Prof. Priyankar Upadhaya,** UNESCO Chair for Peace and Intercultural Understanding at Banaras Hindu University, India

* What shapes education? Society education or vice versa?
* Indian experience, founding ideas about education as transformation. Gandhi saw education as transformation, inclusion. Children’s education must include teaching of their own religion. Many people know more about Kn other religions than their own but it is often distorted. Religion as a social practice.
* When speaking about these aspects, dynamic experiences of society and how they can be inculcated in curricula.
* Used by sages, Sai Baba, Ravi Shanker: several of them speak about inclusive education.
* In India do not have much patience with teaching comparative religion. Very cautious approaches. Textbooks are often misused.
* Can be done in informal manner, workshops, extracurricular activities help in understanding rituals, music, etc.
* State policies have a large role.
* Issue of quality education, remiss among students. Problematic of digital divide. Caters to needs of market but also citizenship issues.

**Professor Tom Banchoff,** Vice President for Global Engagement at Georgetown University

* Many reasons why scaling is difficult.
* First, lack of religious literacy among teachers at all levels. Teacher training is vital.
* Political character of religion is next problem. Situations do differ, face pressures from political environment.
* Even with trained teachers, however, other challenges remain.
* Every effort should be made to train teachers and develop textbooks.
* Specific suggestion and plea for promotion of an effort to work with core texts that emphasize commonalities. It could be a module or folded into different classes. Examples could be the Common Word (2007), which focuses on love of God and love of Neighbor. Or 2019 Declaration on Common Humanity. A common class could be taught across the world. One could support one page lesson plans, in multiple languages. Part of an invitation to different communities.
* Goal would not be to disrupt or take over, but to have a global conversation.

**Amb. David Fernandez Puyana,** Permanent Observer at the United Nations University for Peace (UPEACE) to the United Nations in Geneva

* Global crisis, with many aspects we do not fully know and understand. A time with some of the most dangerous challenges the world has ever faced (Guterres)
* Changes in academy? Digital education field. New technologies have invaded academic space. Houses have become learning spaced.
* Could have increase in supremacist attitudes.
* Vital to promote education for intercultural dialogue.
* Priorities for G20 leaders? To overcome divides in technology. Huge divides, rich have over 80% access, poor around 19%. Great divides.
* Need to break barriers created by COVID-19. Promote online teaching so it reaches all communities, regardless of age, sex, location
* Overcome racism in educational field. All human rights, right to education is best way to address tolerance.

**Wendy Yee Mee Tien,** Senior Lecturer and Director for the Center for Internship Training and Academic Enrichment at the University of Malaya, Malaysia

* Reflections on experience and reviews.
* Much education about religion and religious literacy is dogmatic
* Lack of coordination is a broad problem
* Women are often excluded from intreligious dialouge. Need to include much more.
* Need to promote multicultural and multireligious dialogue.

A conversation among panelists focused on issues of how to handle “proper”, correct teaching of region, and broader issues around religious illiteracy.Training of trainers is one of the best ways to assure correct understanding of religion and developing strong curricula is needed. It also explored challenges around hate speech, both through education but also media including social media. Religious teaching needs to be part of the full curriculum, with a focus on critical thinking a goal. The difficult challenges of teaching about values and teaching values were discussed. Taught versus lived values pose challenges. Spirituality can be one mode and frame but can also be contentious. Even innocent suggestions can be seen as political. Values education must be there, but political dimensions must be kept in mind. The quest for spirituality versus ritual and practice can be seen as a secular ploy, taking one’s practice away. How can we get these complex issues discussed? A tricky issue with a long history.

Several delved further into these issues including how to deal with systems where children are separated by religious traditions for teaching of religion. The panel saw difficulties in separating confessional from broader cultural literacy. Recognizing the beauty of diversity requires formation of teachers and attitudes. A goal is to prevent exclusivist attitudes towards others.

**Panel Description:** *The values focus of education, that includes inclusion and religious literacy, takes on increasing importance in the COVID-19 era. A priority is to address school systems that present manipulative discourses and narratives portraying religions, cultures, cosmogonies and/or worldviews as antagonistic and irreconcilable. Religious inclusiveness and non-discrimination in education are priorities for policy makers as well as religious communities. Promoting critical thinking and positive images of the “other” in school curricula is a key tool for conflict prevention and promoting social cohesion.*

**Guiding questions:**

* What are the priorities and needs in education policy that promise to encourage inclusion and religious and cultural diversity?
* What are examples of inclusive approaches engaging religious and community leaders in developing curricula and building capacity of teachers?
* What approaches can help improve social integration, intercommunal harmony, and respect for religious and cultural differences in schools that can be scaled-up to the policy level?
* What are priorities for G20 leaders for education as part of recovery from the COVID-19 crises?