

The Geneva Interfaith Dialogue

Tuesday, 12 February 2019, 3 pm - Room VIII, Palais des Nations

- Welcome to the fourth edition of the Geneva Interfaith Dialogue. Thank you Ambassador Majali for co-hosting this event during the interfaith harmony week. UNITAR is happy to partner with you again. Thank you Amb. Gallegos for coming all the way from New York. Your commitment to this cause is truly laudable. Thank you distinguished Ambassadors and Pannelists.
- I also like to thank all of you for being here and thank the many who have joined us virtually. Our efforts have to be replicated millions of times to disseminate the message of peace and harmony in our world being torn apart by hate and violence, pushed often by religious biases and prejudices.
- At UNITAR we are convinced that the interfaith dialogue is not a feel good event. It is fundamental to peace and security, sustainable development and the world and the future we want. The 2030 Agenda calls for the development of peaceful and just societies which is the basic building block for the hopes and dreams of our people and their prosperity. Achieving the Agenda, especially for the furthest and most vulnerable will depend upon the harmonious co-existence of people of different identities, faiths and cultures. There is no place for discrimination or persecution.

- False notions of US and THEM are creating different problems in different parts of the world. Solutions to our global problems of poverty, hunger, inequality, climate change, biodiversity loss rejects the concept of us and them. We have all to be part of the solution – universal and engaging all of society.
- There is no place for Islamophobia, or anti-Semitism, or any extreme right wing ideology rooted in religion, or race, or gender, or culture, or ethnicity. In fact, we need zero tolerance for any cause which besieges people by hatred.
- Anger at migrants or refugees, homophobia, violence against children, girls and women have unacceptably permeated too many minds.
- Eradicating hatred and enhancing diversity can start only by the sincere commitment of community and faith leaders everywhere, through inclusive dialogue.
- While we focus today on the important role of faith based organizations in promoting understanding, it is also important to harness the creativity, energy and the tolerant ideology of youth. Our efforts for peace and solidarity must focus on younger people and the bedrock universal human rights.
- Today, more than 80% of the people living on earth are affiliated with a religious group. This number reveals the immense mobilizing potential of religion. Indeed, in many countries, spiritual beliefs and religion are main drivers for cultural values, social inclusion, political engagement, and economic prosperity. How do we tap into this potential as we forge ahead in our quest to achieve the SDGs for all people? How can we turn the dialogue between faiths into something practical? In short, how can we go from dialogue to implementation? Part of the answer, I believe, lies within the realm

of faith-based organizations and their efforts towards sustainable development.

- The United Nations is a secular organization and it is this secularism that provides a safe zone for all religions. All of us here share a common objective — a future of dignity, prosperity, and peace on a healthy planet. Three years ago, this common objective has been agreed upon by the international community in the form of the transformational and universal 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- This Agenda is remarkable in many ways, including the way by which it was created. It has been shaped by what is often considered the largest consultation process carried out by the United Nations. Faith-based organizations have played an important part during this process.
- Today, three years later, is the time to accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda and faith-based organizations continue to play a critical role in addressing the needs of those left behind. After all, today's development challenges are complex and greater than any one Government or organization can solve. Multilateralism is under siege and the human rights agenda is losing traction. Our world is strained by intolerance, discrimination and the rise of populist nationalist politics.
- We must create the space to leverage these partnerships. It is here in particular, where faith-based organizations have a critical role to play. Their core values are largely in line with the 2030 Agenda. This is true whether they are Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jew, Muslim or any other major faith.
- To be true to the spirit of the 2030 Agenda, we must focus our capacity building efforts on those furthest behind. However,

reaching these parts of society is a challenge in itself. Faith-based organizations and religious groupings, on the other hand, often have the outreach and presence in the remotest parts of the world and are operating at the community level. Their activities are integrated into communities and close to the grassroots, they are trusted, and have large networks, thus making them long-lasting and sustainable. They often have the data based on the communities they serve.

- There are several examples where faith-based organizations and the United Nations are working together. One of them is the *Plan of Action to Preventing Violent Extremism* that was launched three years ago. Another one is the United Nations Task Force on Religion and Development whose members work with hundreds of faith-based partners at national, regional and global levels. There are numerous ways in which faith based organizations can power the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
- This year's discussion will address, in particular, the phenomenon of global migration, especially with reference to the historic UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM), which was adopted in Marrakech this past December. We want to attest that faith and faith-based organizations remain critical players in the development of local, national, and international migration policy.
- As far as global solidarity and welcoming the stranger is concerned, I quote from the bible and the Upanishads. Leviticus: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt".

Maha Upanishads (Hinduism): “This person is my relative and that person is a stranger says the small minded one, for one who knows the truth, the whole world is a family”.

- Let me end by referring to my own Indian identity – from the land which gave birth to four major religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism and along with these where all major religions co-exist – Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians. Harmony works best, I have found, where it takes the form of interfaith action for the poorest and most destitute. Words alone are not enough. “There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread” (Mahatma Gandhi).
- With that, I end my opening remarks. I hope that we continue this annual global interfaith dialogue and, more than that, in its wake, find concrete ways to implement effective programmes that serve sustainable development on a regular basis.