

SDGs helping to bridge religion and development

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Two bold assertions might be questioned: that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cannot be achieved without religious engagement, and that every goal, every SDG target, involves religious communities and ideas.

That most of the world's population (84 per cent, by one count) has a religious affiliation is often forgotten in policy-making circles. More important still are the deep roots of compassion and aspirations for a better world that are intrinsic to most faith traditions and teachings. Faith communities provide substantial, if only partially quantified financial and material support. These realities can be obscured both by important tendencies embedded in multinational circles that include, positively, impulses towards objectivity and evidence-based approaches, and, less positively, preconceptions and, simply, blinkers. Long histories and vivid present tensions linked to religious actors encourage many to shy away from them. But theologian Hans Kung's assertion, that there can be no peace without peace among religions, rings true today. Ignoring or sidelining religious roles is too common a mistake.

Religious communities helped shape the SDGs — their influence on United Nations' member governments is significant and countless organizations form part of the civil society

organizations that are omnipresent. But many have pointed out that explicit recognition of religious dimensions in the SDGs themselves is very limited.

For the SDGs to succeed, religious support and engagement are important, not as an afterthought but as an integral part of the architecture. Trust, a sorely needed commodity, community and communication capacity are among religious assets; all are vital to the SDGs. Religious scepticism can undermine progress. Religious engagement must reflect both the complexity and dynamism of religious institutions and communities and their different contexts. Where religious communities are part of moving SDGs forward, that should be well understood. And where there are doubts or blind spots that too demands engagement. Knowledge and dialogue are prerequisites, drawing on the rich experience of religious communities, touching every challenge and every goal.

Four examples highlight how and why religious communities have central roles for the SDGs.

Protecting the world's rainforests, the “lungs of the earth”, is the goal of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI). It draws on commitments of different religious traditions to conservation and protection of natural resources but also to their understanding of the multiple and often complex pressures that drive deforestation in crucial rainforest regions.



Launch of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, June 2017, Nobel Peace Center, Oslo, Norway



Image: Katherine Marshall

Focus on children at Sarvodaya headquarters, July 2023

Religious leaders and communities come together both to increase public awareness and bolster political will to act and to address specific challenges linked, for example, to complex land disputes and tensions over the best ways to meet demands of poor communities that see potential benefits in moving into rainforest regions.

The indigenous communities that play vital roles in protecting tropical rainforests are central to the challenge and need to be included in protection strategies. That, in turn, demands an appreciation for their spiritual beliefs and practices as well as interests linked to welfare and community cohesion. In the Amazon basin, Southeast Asia, and Central Africa, interreligious approaches that honour and respect the indigenous communities are opening new windows for action.

Threats to the world's major rainforests cannot be addressed by any single community alone — governments, private sector, and civil society must all be involved. The IRI offers a vivid example of a multisectoral approach that draws on important assets of religious communities and shows the benefits of a common approach that addresses differences among communities but also builds on common values. It brings religious communities together with governments and business leaders in new, creative coalitions that have promise for progress towards, especially, SDG 10 but at least nine other goals.

The framework of the SDGs is an integral part of the contemporary work of Sarvodaya, a world-renowned movement born

in Sri Lanka. Sarvodaya, from its founding by scholar and activist A. T. Ariyaratne, draws on Buddhist values, especially community involvement and compassion, both to shape its strategies and to motivate staff, volunteers, and those it works with. Sarvodaya has, over its 65-year history, proved itself a dynamic institution, taking on new challenges as the nation has developed and changed. Today, with Sri Lanka facing multiple challenges, economic, social and political, Sarvodaya is involved from the very local to very national levels, across the full SDG framework. It is a valued member of Sri Lanka's civil society and a thought and action leader in addressing challenges that range from conflict resolution to development of social protection systems that are "fit for purpose" to Sri Lanka's current challenges. It brings its religious heritage and conscious value system into every aspect of its strategic and day to day work.

The SDGs are distilled into five 'Ps', and in the strategic framing of its work, Sarvodaya can point to links to all five, with a rich approach that builds on the core spiritual values and on its practical work and the lived experience of the organization. 'People' reflects the deep commitment to human development, both individual and community, and core commitment to end extreme poverty through development of human capacities. 'Peace' is an essential part of work in a deeply divided society contending with the legacies of a long and bitter war. 'Prosperity' points to a continuing focus



Image: Katherine Marshall

Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne, Director General, Sarvodaya, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, July 2023

on decent livelihoods and economic justice as a framing value. ‘Planet’ is reflected in a growing awareness of the values of conservation and a broad commitment to respect for nature and the environment, linked to core Buddhist teachings. And Sarvodaya has a long history of rich ‘Partnerships’ with organizations across different sectors. The focus on the SDG framework is exemplified in Sarvodaya’s longstanding commitment to children and to engaging them in efforts to work for a better future.

SDG target 3.7 focuses on specific and, in some settings, controversial goals: “By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes.” Issues of sexuality and more specifically approaches to family planning are often viewed as difficult topics in religious settings, and they also raise the crucial topic of women’s equality. In West Africa’s Sahel region, which has some of the world’s highest population growth rates, questions about religious roles and approaches were so sensitive that the topic was essentially taboo in some settings.

In Senegal, a Muslim leader, Cheikh Saliou Mbacké, seasoned by extensive experience in international interreligious conflict resolution work, took on the challenge of turning a loosely defined commitment under Senegal’s national family planning strategy to use religious champions into something practical. Starting deliberately and cautiously, he engaged, in an approach that involved a widening circle of religious leaders from the different religious communities, Muslim and Christian, first in exploring the facts of population growth and maternal and child mortality, then in approaching leading religious communities and their leaders to secure support or at

least a willingness to listen and maintain neutrality. Over time, the informal circle grew into an association and then a formal, well grounded non governmental organization (NGO), with a strategy supported by an intellectual analysis that argued for religious support for child spacing and free access for married couples to modern contraception. The NGO, *Cadre des Religieux pour la Santé et le Développement*, or Religious Support for Health and Development (CRSD), is now a respected partner of both Senegal’s Ministry of Health and the multi-country Ouagadougou Partnership, and is an integral part of the broad strategy to address family planning in the region.

Sexuality and family planning are still sensitive issues for religious leaders and contribute to hesitation, for example, to introduce robust sex education programmes in schools, CRSD is forthright on what it sees as limitations for religious engagement, especially in promoting family planning for youth. The experience of a broadly framed and honest engagement has, however, supported a continuing dialogue that also translates into religious engagement on related issues including access to health, child marriage, and long-standing debates on education curricula.

The broad scope of religious involvement in global development work, including climate action and humanitarian challenges, is an important lesson from the COVID-19 emergencies. This underscores the need for scrutiny of the SDG framework with a religious lens. In the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, the roles of religious communities were obvious — large religious gatherings were among early ‘super spreader’ events, religiously owned and run health facilities were direct service providers, and many, including the World Health Organization, appreciated the distinctive and powerful potential for religious communities to convey messages, positive and otherwise, about health-linked behaviours such as washing hands, social distancing and vaccination. Early collaborative ventures opened doors to active engagement that extended beyond immediate issues to bolder ventures like the Faiths4Vaccines coalition that focused on working with religious actors to reach underserved communities and to current work on pandemic preparedness.

But the religious roles went well beyond the classic public health roles. Religious communities were at the forefront of the safety nets that communities across the world needed as jobs vanished, supply chains were disrupted and food prices rose. Grief, mental health challenges and isolation also evoked much needed religious responses. Religious leaders contributed to efforts to address misinformation and hate speech and tensions among communities, linked to the pandemic and beyond.

In sum, countless examples of religious action and support across the SDGs bolster the assertion that there are significant religious links to every SDG as well as vital roles, some well developed and some still potential, to play. What is too often missing is thoughtful analysis and integration. And the case that religious engagement goes beyond the desirable to the essential in successful implementation and achievement is strong. Informed and creative engagement needs to take fully into account the wide diversity of religious communities and their development engagement. But, with positive engagement, much more can be achieved.