

“Listening to the cries of the earth and of the poor”
Panel on Perspective from Abrahamic Religions –
A Christian Perspective
International Conference on Religions
and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
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Let me begin by thanking HE Cardinal Peter Turkson and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development for putting together this timely International Conference under the theme “Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals” (SDGs).

I am grateful for this invitation to offer some insights from a Christian perspective. I will draw from some key biblical narratives that nurture and inspire our presence and action of service in the world, and point to some of the issues and challenges we may want to consider as we journey toward the year 2030.

I begin with the biblical story that the SDGs bring to my mind. It is a parable, or a metaphoric teaching of Jesus, in which he explains how much each and every single human being matters in the eyes of God (Matthew 18:12-14). There was a shepherd who noticed that one of his 100 sheep became lost. He left behind the 99 in order to look for the lost one. After much searching, he eventually found it. The message of the parable is clear -- God doesn't want anyone to be lost or to be left behind.

As this parable illustrates, the Agenda 2030 with its slogan “leave no one behind” resonates well with the Christian community. It connects easily with our deeply-held faith convictions and practices. It is an important platform to stem the tide of the growing gaps between people in our world, a tide that stands in stark contradiction to the vision we share. It addresses the prevailing logic that not only presupposes, but often excludes some at the cost seeking prosperity or development. Our voice needs to be straightforward. A development paradigm that operates on the basis of exclusion cannot be called development but is exploitation.

While there is this evident convergence between the Christian faith and Agenda 2030, their approaches are distinctive. For Christians, our engagement will be first an expression of our faith, a response to what we hear and believe, before it is a response to the SDGs. What this distinctiveness calls for is that we continue to be engaged in translating and interpreting our specific frameworks so that we clearly identify both the common space for our partnerships, as well as the boundaries based on who are the various actors.

“Religious literacy” has been an important concept in this respect. I am grateful for the important strides that the UN system has made, for instance, by calling together the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development, and recently constituting a Faith Advisory Council to the Task Force. This is a good development, which we in the ecumenical movement strongly endorse. It has provided a valuable space for interfaith interaction, to the benefit of many of us.

The International Partnership on Religion and Development (PaRD), offers another valuable space, which distinctively focuses on the intersections between governments and FBOs. Here too, many of us are involved in the quest to develop literacy. Yet, the concept of “religious literacy” may be too narrow. It assumes that others need to learn about us, the FBOs, but that we, the FBOs, don’t seem to need to learn from others.

The communion I represent, the Lutheran World Federation, works together with the ACT Alliance on an approach that looks on the other side: assisting local churches and organizations to understand the mind-set, the instruments and the procedures for developing development and cooperation with governments and the UN system. This bi-directional literacy training needs to be safeguarded. Only when we fully understand the “otherness” of the other will partnerships be effective and sustainable.

It is crucial for us as Christians to work on our relation to the Human Rights framework. Faith and its foundational narratives are the constitutive grammar that articulates our engagement around the vision of leaving no one behind. The Agenda 2030, instead, is or should be shaped by the Human Rights framework. With other actors and accountability standards, this framework affirms the deep-held conviction that each human being is born with inherent dignity and value. This is something we fully share and endorse as a conviction of faith. Together with several other faith traditions we regard each person as created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26 – 28).

We are at a critical juncture in these times. Will we move forward with or without Human Rights? The overall accountability to Human Rights and its binding instruments and conventions is fading away. Dictators are left unchecked, the Geneva Refugee Convention (1951) is being pushed aside, and humanitarian aid is being politicized.

As someone who grew up during dictatorships in Latin America, I can testify that the disregard for Human Rights results in people being left behind, if not crushed. Agenda 2030 with its SDGs must be linked to the Human Rights obligations of States and the multilateral instruments that have been created for that purpose. Otherwise, Agenda 2030 may contribute to a further weakening of the accountability to these obligations, and people and entire communities will continue to be left behind.

In Switzerland, where I currently live, there is a 14.6% gap between the salaries men and women get paid for the same job. This means that until February 22 of each year, women are, in effect, working for no pay. What is the rationale for this?

Recently I was in a country enforcing a policy in which school-aged girls are immediately removed from school if they are pregnant. As we discussed with the local church, what about the boys that had made them pregnant, or even worse, if the pregnancy resulted from abuse?

If such a gender bias or gap is left unaddressed, women will continue to be left behind, underpaid, less educated, stigmatized, and not on an equal footing for development.

I realize that gender discourse is often difficult and challenges us as FBOs. I personally am encouraged to face this challenge when I read in the Holy Bible of those many situations in which our Lord Jesus Christ met with women with whom he was not supposed to meet, talked with those he was not supposed to talk, even taking direction from whom he should not have (Matthew 15:21-28) --- particularly women! He did so because of what the parable of the Good Shepherd outlines as God's vision – that no one should be left behind. The challenge of how to overcome the systemic inequality in the relations between men and women, particularly around issues of power and resources. Ignoring this dimension leaves behind not only some, but half the population.

I also want strongly to advocate in Agenda 2030 for a much clearer focus on children and youth. We are heading toward an important inter-generational conflict. The young are increasingly realizing that neither the economy nor the ecology are working for them. I used to speak of youth and their concerns as a “ticking bomb” for societies, but I no longer do so, because this tends to put the blame on them. It is actually the other way around. The stage has been set in which work as we have known it will no longer exist, at least for large sectors of the young, and because of climate change and the loss of biodiversity, the ecological system sustaining life is deeply endangered. Youth are not the ticking bomb, but how the economy has developed and natural resources depleted. On August 1, 2018, the “Earth Overshoot Day” was reached. From that day until the end of 2018, we lived off the resources of youth and children. We did not just borrow from them, but I fear we overtook them.

The massive gluttony for resources doesn't stop even when it endangers our own children. The word “enough,” for which we incur deepening financial and ecological debt, does not even seem to exist anymore. Those who will be paying this debt are now the children and youth.

I am profoundly grateful to HH Pope Francis for his Encyclical “Laudato Si.” Without it, the Paris agreement on climate change could hardly have been achieved. I am equally indebted to HH the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who for years has raised his voice on issues related to the ecological disorders we are facing. Both of them constantly remind us of our role as stewards of God's creation (Genesis 1:26). We share this with other religions. This suggests the deep conversion and transformation that is needed among us to live into this vocation and thereby still avert the dangers we are facing because of the rapid ecological degradation.

Here I see a unique contribution of FBOs. At the end, how we live and what matters in life, what we call a successful or a full life is a deeply spiritual question – even in contexts of secularization. The changes that are ahead of us won't be possible without changing minds and hearts. It is this conversion, based on a deep conversation about what life is and what matters in life, that we as FBOs are in a unique place to support. It is a conversation about meaning and relationships --- to the neighbor and the created world. Admittedly, this calls for an important theological shift, from what been an anthropocentric theology toward one that is more eco-centric.

This leads me to my last, deeply cherished biblical text, about Jesus on the top of a mountain. Some of the disciples suddenly saw God in him as they had not before (Matthew 17:1-9). They wanted to stay there, enjoying that moment of divine revelation. Yet, Jesus took them down to the plains, where he met and healed a boy who continually was falling into fire such that his face was disfigured.

From the encounter with the transfigured Lord to meeting the disfigured human being and the mourning creation – that is the space within which we move. There is a deep connection between worship and action. The divine liturgy in our temple and the liturgy of service and witness that follows in the sacred space of this world are interlinked. By holding these dimensions together, we add a distinctive voice and practice to the Agenda 2030. We can and we should be ourselves as FBOs, and in doing so, be meaningful actors in the Agenda 2030 and its call for partnerships.

I personally look forward to deepened engagement, to stronger interfaith cooperation and action and, in doing so, to intensified dialogue among all of us who are carried by this powerful vision to leave no one behind.