

REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS STRATEGIC LEARNING EXCHANGE ON RELIGION AND DIPLOMACY

FOCUS ON DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN
PARTNERSHIPS



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FOR MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

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Executive Summary

During November 27-29, the United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development (chaired by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)) together with 14 co-hosting partners, convened the first Asia-Pacific Regional United Nations Strategic Learning Exchange (SLE) on Religion and Diplomacy, in Jakarta, Indonesia.

The objective of the UN SLEs is to facilitate peer to peer learning, analysis and networking. To that end, 84 participants brought together their respective experiences, case studies and perspectives, and assessed these with a view to specific Sustainable Development Goals. Notably **SDG 3** (health and well-being), **SDG 5** (gender equality), **SDG 13** (climate action), **SDG 16** (peaceful, just and inclusive societies and institutions), with **goal 17** (partnerships for sustainable development) as cross-cutting.

The participants reflected on and shared their own initiatives and listened to each others' experiences, comparing, contrasting and thus enhancing their understanding of how partnering between diverse religious actors (religious leaders, faith-based development and humanitarian NGOs/FBOs, and religious institutions) and (inter-)governmental ones, adds specific value. They also assessed how related risks and challenges may manifest, and means to manage and/or seek to mitigate.

The following are some highlights of the shared learnings from the discussions:

- **Interpretation matters.** Participants agreed that “religions” are not harmful per se, but the acceptance and promotion of polarizing religious views and violence in the name of religion are based on certain interpretations of the teachings. There is a trend of misusing religious rhetoric and using teachings selectively to justify discriminatory views and practices based on “religious half-knowledge”. Religious discourse, jurisprudential exegesis or commonly understood cultural interpretations thereof, are critical to the work of/with/about religion.
- **Responsibility of religious leaders.** Generally, religious leaders enjoy high moral respect in the Asia Pacific region and can therefore act as role models to inspire communities and engage with authorities. They also play a key role when it comes to rectifying harmful practices justified on religious grounds (e.g. gender-based violence).
- **Engagement outside our “comfort zone”.** It is important for governmental as well as non-governmental actors to engage not just with those religiously inspired actors with whom we share values, but also with those that we consider being the more extreme voices. Being inclusive and culturally sensitive as well as acknowledging different political perspectives is complicated and time-consuming but likely to be worth the effort. The question is whether we are well equipped to engage with the more ‘extreme’ groups, and how to go about it.

- **“Rediscovery” of religion by Governmental and intergovernmental actors.** As ‘religious engagement’ becomes more topical for (inter)governmental organizations, the question is how to recalibrate the engagement – becoming more systematic and informed about its complexity, the benefits as well the risks of widening the partnerships – while keeping this balanced with other civil society outreach and support.
- **Risk of “commodification” and instrumentalisation of religion.** As religion becomes one of the axes of foreign policy and development praxis, there is a concern that the perceptions and work with “religion” are being perceived as yet another tool in usual policy and planning, thus risking us all to lose touch with the fact that what is being ‘worked with’, or ‘used’ ultimately relates to the deepest of human emotions – i.e. people’s sense of faith.
- **There is no blanket ‘faith-based approach’. Rather, we should opt for ‘faith-sensitive approaches’.** There is no one approach which is supposed to cover any and all ‘religious’ aspects. The latter essentialises the roles, existences, modus operandi, beliefs and realities of different religions, faiths, and believers. One needs to consider the role of religions depending on the specific context.
- **Interfaith dialogue and cooperation is growing.** The SLE revealed that many new initiatives are implemented at policy as well as ground level, e.g. Muslim and Christian FBOs exchange practices and approaches in the area of health and child protection. Nevertheless, not all faith-based actors feel comfortable in a multi-stakeholder and inter-faith dialogue set up. Some prefer bilateral and discrete approaches (faith to faith or faith to government). The inter-faith approach should not be taken for granted and preferences of diverse faith actors need to be appreciated.
- **Social media** play an important role in the spread of harmful religious narratives. There is a need to make better use of modern and tested communication approaches & tools to foster dialogue among faith traditions, and to defy constructs of religion which are causing harm. There is a lot of room to spread more “good news stories” to strengthen the positive narratives around the impact of religion.
- **All in all, trust building is key and still requires attention.**

About the Strategic Learning Exchange

The choice of Indonesia to host the SLE in the region is deliberate. It is an example of coexistence in plurality and diversity. The reasons for engaging on this set of issues is the growing realisation within many policy circles especially, that religion intersects with almost every aspect of life (unlike in the European hemisphere where the separation between Church and State was assumed to be every other nation's reality) and is playing an increasingly important role in political spaces.

All cosponsors of the SLE contribute respective resources (time, energy and finances). It is in fact, a genuinely joint effort to co-create. As such, the SLE disrupts the traditional donor-recipient logic that often underpins international developments. Because the SLE is also conceived as a peer learning opportunity - i.e. learning from each other, tapping into internal experiences and knowledge, rather than seeking to be informed by outside expertise.

The rules for engagement during the SLE are straight-forward: (i) A call to speak freely with Chatham House Rules (i.e. no attribution); (ii) respect for one another – including listening without interruption (iii) everyone is urged to share their ideas and opinions and expertise.

THE UNITED NATIONS STRATEGIC LEARNING EXCHANGES ON RELIGION- DEVELOPMENT AND DIPLOMACY – CONCEPT NOTE AND INTRODUCTION

Asia-Pacific Regional United Nations Strategic Learning Exchange (SLE) on Religion and Diplomacy: focus on Development and Humanitarian Partnerships

CO-SPONSORS

- United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development - with
 - National Cohosting partners, including Universitas Gadjah MADA Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies Graduate School, Netherlands-Indonesia Consortium for Muslim-Christian Relations, and the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI).
 - Co-hosting from the Embassies of the Netherlands and Switzerland
 - UNFPA and UN Regional and National Offices
 - The European Union, including the EEAS and the Directorate General on International Cooperation and Development
 - Faith-Based Partners in the region as well as the UN's international Faith-Based NGOs (FBOs) and academic Partners – including ACT Alliance and its members, Kerk in Actie, World Vision, Islamic Relief, the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, Religions for Peace, and PERSETIA.

I-What is the UN Strategic Learning Exchange?

The overall goal of the SLE is

To develop joint learning, analysis and networking of/by governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental partners, around the intersections between religion, development (SDGs) and diplomacy -- including the nexus with humanitarian and conflict dynamics -- through realistic appraisals of actual praxis and relevant policies in the region. The SLE is not a space for declarations, policy statements, or plans of action. Rather this is a catalyzer of networking, knowledge-sharing and opportunities for partnerships.

Rationale

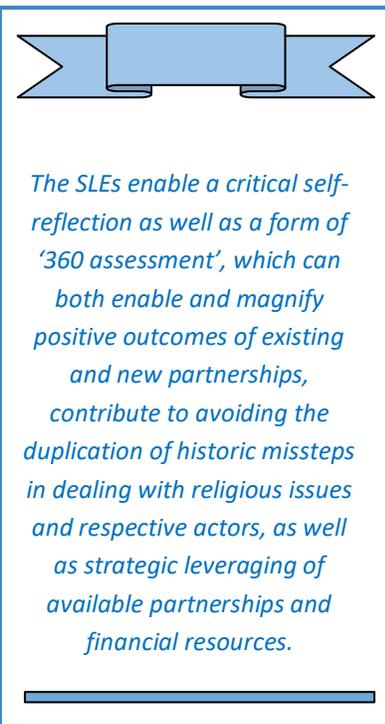
There is growing recognition in the international development and humanitarian community that religions play a critical moral, social, and political role in human development. The collective resources they bring to the table (human, financial and spiritual) require study and honest appreciation from all working to serve these same communities.

Many governmental and intergovernmental organizations are now partnering with faith-based or faith-inspired non-governmental organizations, as well as local faith communities and religious leaders. These forms of engagement and the challenges inherent in them demand reflection, review and even critique. Moreover, the various means of outreach, and the implications (ongoing and potential) would benefit from review and (re)consideration.

By now it is an oft iterated mantra that “development/peace/security will not be achieved without engaging religious groups/leaders”. Indeed, in many contexts where faith-based actors provide significant amounts of health, nutrition, sanitation and educational services, accomplishing the goals of the 2030 Agenda may well be in direct proportion to the effectiveness of partnerships with these sets of actors – among others. But the increasing momentum, diversity and intentionality of interest, as well as financial and policy spending taking place, around “religion and...”, should deliberately integrate space for reflection, wherein the very same actors intent on this work, can critically assess the rationale, the means and the ends. The critical reflection space is built around the actual development and diplomacy praxis, and the practitioners thereof.

Beginning in 2010, the United Nations Strategic Learning Exchange (SLE) were designed to provide that space under the auspices of the United Nations System Staff College. UN programme and policy staff were invited to learn from one another’s experiences under the broad rubric of “Religion and Development”. Over the years, such critical convenings have proven to be a helpful – if not necessary - means to networking between and among the diverse representatives and their sectors, as well as acquiring more informed insights for planning, policy-making and programme management.

Participants are expected to bring their expertise on the linkages between religion (and religious actors) with Agenda 2030/the SDGs, including issues ranging from conflict and peace building, diplomacy and policy guidance, to hands on work in the areas of education, health, gender equality, environment, employment and climate change.



II-What is needed for this SLE?

As is the case with the previous two *regional* iterations of the SLE, the *co-sponsorship by both governmental as well as intergovernmental counterpart(s) and faith-based NGOs* is required. In the North American regional SLE, the UN co-hosted together with USAID, World Vision, Islamic Relief-USA and the Jewish Theological Seminary. In the Arab Regional SLE, the government of Jordan co-sponsored (through the Patronage of HRH Prince Hassan bin Talal), and the Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization (JHCO) as well as the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit/GIZ.

The *cosponsoring and coordinating* entities, therefore, should factor into their deliverables, a combination of the following:

- Nominating a representative (either in HQ or *in situ*) to serve as part of the Coordination, Planning and Facilitation team for/of the SLE (this team has a Terms of Reference provided at the end);
- Nominating senior government representation to speak at the opening and/or conclusion of the meeting;
- Covering the full cost of partners/members (per the criteria below) to participate – aiming for a final balanced/50-50 representation of governmental and non-governmental participants;
- Offering a venue for 2.5 days which can accommodate 75-100 guests (at the opening only) and (a maximum of 50) participants in the training (with space for break-out groups);
- Sponsoring a welcome dinner and meals for the participants for the duration of the SLE.

III- The Strategic Learning Exchange Methodology © UNIATF-RELIGION 2010

Questions Framing the Objectives and Structure

1. What are the interlinkages between religion, diplomacy, development, and humanitarian work?

Increased understanding of the linkages between religion and SDGs in contemporary contexts with a view to intergovernmental dynamics (including globalization, political change, conflict, peacebuilding, climate change, economic and financial contexts and impact on aid effectiveness, social inclusion, cultural diversity, etc.);

2. How do these interlinkages impact on diplomacy, particularly the practical development and policy endeavors at the national and regional levels?

Identification of respective case studies highlighting opportunities and challenges of working with

religious communities and faith-based organizations in development and humanitarian work; Challenges and opportunities internal to the cultures of development and humanitarian organizations, e.g. religion as part of the challenges behind – as well as responses to – social inclusion dynamics, climate change, and diverse political and economic conflicts.

3. What are some of the existing partnership initiatives between intergovernmental (UN and EU entities), governmental and faith-based actors? and How can these efforts be enhanced to realise the SDGs/Agenda 2030??

This is the space for critical assessments of challenges and existing (as well as future) partnership opportunities. The main outcome is to enhance the ‘how to’ of outreach to and partnering with faith-based organizations. To which end, the SLE considers the conceptual and practical intersections between development work and religious issues, noting the specific challenges posed, the lessons learned and the best practices emerging from collaboration.

The SLE is therefore the space, which enables a shared compilation of the lessons learned from advocacy and service delivery work, at the program design, implementation and evaluation phases.

The structure of the SLE is dependent on several key factors and features as follows:

- a. ***Convening Diversity and the Depth – Participants cum Resource People:*** A mix of participants who can reflect the governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental expertise selected according clear criteria (see below) is the tipping point of the SLE;
- b. ***Harvesting the Knowledge within – Peer to Peer Learning:*** The learning which takes place is based on a peer-to-peer modality. This is to harvest the experiences of the participants working within the institutions themselves. The participants are, therefore, effectively the resource people who learn from one another;
- c. ***Facilitation from within:*** Expert facilitation is provided by those who combine both the institutional know-how and diverse kinds of experiences in working with and within the religion, development and diplomacy nexus, together with academic/scientific expertise. *The facilitators themselves are therefore from the very same organizational spaces which are being convened, and they have practical expertise as well as prior experience of participating in the SLEs.*
- d. ***Comparing Worldviews:*** this focuses on giving equal voice and time to the different constituencies to share their own worldview, and their respective readings of the contemporary

geopolitical dynamics, which forms the backdrop of all the discussions. Each constituency, in plenaries, presents these worldviews, and then a joint discussion is enabled.

e. ***Bringing Actual Experiences and Learnings from the field:*** The SLE insists, as one of the mandatory requirements, that *each participant bring a written case study*, written according to a set template, which presents a specific partnership endeavor revolving around the religion and development theme. This is then discussed within smaller groups (arranged per either thematic/SDG areas, or types of interventions), in a café/market place format. The learning and recommendations from the diverse discussions are harvested at the end of the group discussions, in plenary.

f. ***Walking the Talk of “Partnership” Through Co-Convening and Co-Facilitating:*** While the entire purpose is to review, assess and recommend better partnerships between the governmental and the faith-based actors, there is no better way to realise these partnerships than to co-convene and co-facilitate the actual SLEs. This is the lesson learned from a decade of SLE iterations, where the visibility of the successful management and delivery around the shared responsibilities of stewarding, organizing and facilitating, itself demonstrates the values and objectives being discussed over the course of the SLE.

IV-Criteria for Participation

- ***Cost-Sharing:*** Organisers and Participants each undertake to cover their own travel and accommodation costs fully. The Coordinating Team shall be responsible for providing suggestions (only) for venue and accommodation, and undertake to pool respective resources into providing meals and any required equipment for the SLE.
- ***Been There & Done That:*** Actual / demonstrable experiences of partnership: with and / or outreach to either UN and/or faith-based organizations;
- ***Bona Fide [Governmental, Intergovernmental, non-governmental Partners]:*** Faith-based representatives / participant(s) should be partners of the governmental and intergovernmental entities, with actual field experience, and prepared to sponsor their own participation;
- ***Knowledge Hubs:*** Thematic SDG areas coverage: Areas of expertise should cover diverse SDG areas / issues¹;
- ***Can Do/Can Speak:*** Preparedness to provide and to discuss written case studies (as per standard template).

¹ Individual Case studies are prepared by ALL participants to present their experience with FBO-(inter)governmental engagement.

- *Balance*: Regional, religious, gender, institutional (governmental/intergovernmental and non-governmental) and thematic (religion, development, humanitarian, diplomacy).

V-More Information

A sample of the materials from previous SLEs can be found here:

<https://sites.google.com/view/sle-religion/home>

Pictures and Videos of the UN SLE Jakarta can be found here:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1h5VZBv77LUOU2xIqV_Gpt-JzEclEIVQu?usp=sharing

PART II: OPENING SPEECHES

The United Nations Resident Coordinator, Ms. Anita Nirody,

I would like to thank all the sponsors of this event for the opportunity to offer remarks at this strategic learning exchange on such an important topic as religion and diplomacy which I will link to development and humanitarian partnerships. We at the UN are pleased to partner with you and engage jointly in this important exchange.

Thank you also to the Embassy of the Netherlands for hosting this event at the Erasmus Huis this morning.

As we all know, there is a growing recognition in the international development and humanitarian community that religious organizations have a lot to offer in terms of being critical moral, social and political agents of human development.



Ms. Anita Nirody, United Nations Resident Coordinator

The resources they bring to the table, whether human, financial or spiritual, provide important support to the communities they work in. Faith actors are capable of social mobilization that can shift attitudes and behaviours towards those more conducive to sustainable development.

In Indonesia, just as other parts of the world, religion plays an important role that continues to shape and influence all aspects of life for their followers, including but not limited to, providing awareness on development issues such as family planning to their followers through faith-based educational systems and religious gatherings.

Engaging with Faith-based Organizations (FBOs) and Religious Leaders where they could add value is therefore important for successful inclusive programming in development work. In the humanitarian space, FBOs are providing critical assistance to those impacted by disasters and there continues to be potential to engage FBOs in disaster prevention and strengthening the resilience of communities to disasters.

Many UN agencies in Indonesia are partnering with faith-based or faith-inspired service-delivery non-governmental organizations, local faith communities and religious leaders to help advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

One such example is the “Better Reproductive Health for All in Indonesia Programme 2018-2022” in which UNFPA and UNICEF work with relevant authorities to improve the lives of women and girls in Indonesia through strengthened capacity for religious and community leaders on Maternal Health Matters (MHM), Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), family planning and child marriage.

UN Women is increasingly bringing together religious leaders, faith actors, civil society and women organizations to develop a new narrative to promote greater tolerance and peaceful society. It focuses on promoting women voices and their important role as peace agents. Engaging with religious leaders and faith actors, UN Women focuses on promoting women’s rights to physical integrity, autonomy, security and safety. Equal emphasis is placed on women’s economic empowerment and right to participate in public sphere, including education and decent work. Most importantly, UN Women advocates for greater social dialogue across different social groups through numerous initiatives with faith-based institutions, civil society organizations and actors at all levels. One example was in Sumenep village, on the island of Madura in East Java, under the auspices of UN Women’s “Empowered Women, Peaceful Communities” programme supported by the Government of Japan. It brought together more than 5,000 people from women’s economic groups, religious leaders, and female and male students at the Pesantren Annuqqayah, Indonesia’s oldest Islamic boarding school to promote social dialogue to identify specific ways that women in Madura contribute to peace. This included the demonstration of women entrepreneurs’ work to create community resilience, theater and other artistic performances

Another example is the UNDP’s collaboration with the Center of Islam and Society at the Islamic University of Jakarta through a youth-targeted programme on the prevention of violent extremism through religious education. Our collaboration has produced policy recommendations that have since been adopted by the Government.

Development Financing is a key for implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A globally agreed upon sustainable development agenda to improve people, planet and prosperity, and leave no one behind. Islamic finance presents a big potential in Indonesia and the UN is leveraging several financial instruments to support the SDGs. For example, UNDP has collaborated with the National Board of Zakat, who through a blended finance modality, contributed to the development of micro hydropower plant in Jambi Province. The contribution by the National Board of Zakat marked a landmark step that formalized the channelling of zakat funds to advance the SDGs.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In recent times, we are seeing growing religious conservatism across the world which might undermine pluralist and multicultural societies.

We are seeing religion being manipulated to justify incitement to violence and discrimination. In 2017, the UN Secretary General Launched the Fez Plan of Action that outlines way in which religious leaders can prevent incitement to violence and contribute to peace and stability.

This makes inter-faith dialogues aimed at building bridges and understanding among different religious groups, government institutions, development partners and civil society essential. The overarching purpose of this dialogue rests on the fact that there is richness and strength in diversity - it is never a threat. Profiting from that diversity requires a strong investment in social cohesion policies.

Earlier this year, His Holiness Pope Francis, along with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, His Eminence Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, signed a moving testament for mutual respect. It stated that the diversity of religions is willed by the Creator. "This divine wisdom," they wrote, "is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derive."

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Overall FBOs can play an important role in the development and humanitarian space. At the same time, it is worth noting that working with FBOs also presents few challenges.

In some contexts, religious institutions may be involved in political processes or dynamics, which compromises their neutrality as agents of development and humanitarian work.

In others, fragmentation among religious institutions can make it difficult to systematically include them in humanitarian and development partnerships and which can impact the potential for inter-religious collaboration as well as learning from each other.

These are all issues which can be overcome with strengthened dialogue and collaboration. Broader engagement and partnerships with FBOs in development and humanitarian work is fully aligned with SDG Goal 17 on transformative partnerships, to ensure that no one is left behind.

I do believe that this strategic dialogue and learning on religion and development will further enhance our mutual understanding on how to best work with and harness the potential of FBO's in our humanitarian and development work.

I would like to convey my appreciation to all parties, government partners, development partners, academia, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, and UN agencies who worked together to make these discussions possible today.

I wish you a productive learning session. Terima Kasih Banyak- Thank you very much.

Prof. Roel van der Veen, Head of Political Affairs of Netherlands Embassy (Read Out)

Religion is recognised today as a relevant theme within the Dutch political affairs/foreign policy (as opposed to 25 years ago). It is often linked to security.

Prof van der Veen encouraged participants to be provocative to avoid the appearance of “preaching to the converted”.

Some of the dilemmas to highlight:

- “One of the theories about why bad things happen in the world is because ‘good people keep silent’... So the question is: are you brave enough to speak up in face of injustice?”
- Who is not here? Who is not here? What groups are not present? Politicians and policy makers are missing. The problem is that they are often invited, and not necessarily show up or keep silent when attending such events. Therefore, the question is, what can you as a group solve?
- The question of interaction with “others”: What does it mean when our religious behaviour is not liked / bothers other people? How can religions coexist in the public space? In several Western countries, religion has been pushed to the domestic/private realm. Is this something that can be replicated in other countries? How can the rules for interaction be agreed upon?



Prof. Roel Van Der Veen, Head of Political Affairs of Netherlands Embassy

H.E. Dr. Vincent Piket, Ambassador of the European Union to Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam (Read out)



H.E. DR. VINCENT PIKET, Ambassador of the European Union to Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam

There is growing awareness that religion matters in the EU foreign policy and development agenda. Notwithstanding the secular underpinning of the European Union, there is a need to increase understanding and awareness of the role that religion and religious actors play. This is more than ever relevant today in view of the 2030 Agenda as well as of the existing conflicts worldwide. Religion has been “a blind spot” for the EU foreign and development policy, and there is a compelling case to increase our understanding and learning.

We have been happy to partner with SLE in the past in New York at its last meeting in November of last year. The European External Action Service/EEAS and Development Cooperation/DEVCO have been deepening our understanding

of the role of religion and faith actors in our various policy areas. We acknowledge how useful it has been to learn from the experience from the UN in particular from UNFPA and the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development. We are eager to learn more about who to engage and how to engage meaningfully, as per our development objectives and for our humanitarian partnerships.

The EU has adopted a [policy](#) on Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) in 2013. Also, the European Commission appointed a senior politician as Special Envoy on FoRB from 2016 to 2019.

We have some practical experiences to share, where we have seen the usefulness of reaching out and giving voice and visibility to different faith-based actors, who are often overlooked and whose feedback has proven very critical in terms of providing grass-roots’ feedback to our policies. Some of our events include the following:

- An Erasmus-like Exchange Platform on Religion and Social Inclusion which was announced in September serving to enable an understanding of religion as a resource for peaceful co-existence.
- A UNGA side event on “The Role of Women of Faith in Creating Sustainable Peace”, which took place in September 2018. The event served to underline how religious actors encompass women leaders who also serve to create more inclusive societies, partly through their work in all areas of social development, including health and education.
- A Roundtable on Reconciliation and Reconstruction, hosted in Iraq in 2019, including a full spectrum of all religious leaders gathered to emphasize their potential for bridge-building.

Mr. Michael Cottier, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Switzerland to Indonesia, East Timor and ASEAN

Excellences,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Switzerland is very pleased to be among the co-sponsors of the first United Nations South-East Asia Regional Learning Exchange on Religion. We are happy to see so many participants from the region and from Indonesia seizing this important learning opportunity.

Faith based communities and actors motivated by different religions and worldviews are important players in the development, humanitarian and peacebuilding fields. And they have been neglected as meaningful partners for too long by governments and intergovernmental agencies. Switzerland is no exception to that - despite our long humanitarian and development tradition, which was initially strongly faith-inspired and implemented largely by faith-based partners.



Mr. Michael Cottier, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Switzerland to Indonesia, Timor Leste and ASEAN

Religion and worldviews play an essential part in people's life, throughout the world. They are a source of great strength and mobilisation. But religion and worldviews can also be a source of dissent and a trigger for violent conflict. And they can be an obstacle to development when views differ and contradict each other – for example on women's and men's rights. The picture is not black and white. We should neither allow ourselves to be naïve about the positive potential of religions, nor is it appropriate to be overly pessimistic regarding the negative potential.

That is why we highly welcome and support the joint learning efforts that will happen during the coming two days among representatives of the UN, faith-based partners, NGOs, academia and Government. To foster – in the words of the UN organisers – a “*realistic* appraisal of actual practices and relevant policies” at the intersections between religion, development and diplomacy. **Being realistic** about religion's negative and positive potentials is the basis for doing things better.

Pragmatic and mutually beneficial cooperation between faith-based actors and non-faith actors is what is needed to gain ground with the implementation of the Sustainable

Development Goals. We acknowledge that **it is not always straightforward to get there**. There are plenty of different **challenges** that actors face. I will only name two of them that are particularly important to Switzerland due to our history and constitutional mandate to promote peaceful coexistence between peoples.

1. **First: Diversity.** While diversity is a great source of inspiration and strength it is also very challenging to manage diversity. Reaching the same understanding among different partners in order to move things ahead is time- and not less nerve-consuming. While so-called “secular” and faith-based actors may share a same language, their “mental framework”, work culture and worldviews are often quite different. The regional as well as national-international dynamics add to the diversity – and to the complications. Misunderstandings or lack of understanding may be the result, sometimes even fostering antagonisms and hampering joint progress.
2. **Second: Participation** in the sense of including all those actors who have to be on board in a development or peacebuilding process. We know, based on our own history, that lack of inclusiveness is not just a substantial obstacle for sustainable development but it may also fuel conflicts as it enhances grievances of those who feel left out. Identifying and including those who matter is more easily said than done. It is not unusual that we only discover the excluded once they have turned into spoilers.

Becoming aware of these and other challenges, and finding ways of overcoming them by exchanging, sharing with and learning from each other is a precious added value of the Strategic Learning Exchange. We hope that the two days of intense learning will yield new and useful insights and inspiration to all of you.

Let me thank the organisers and co-sponsors for having pulled this event together. I know that the notions of **diversity** and **inclusive participation** that I just mentioned are not just hollow words to you but that you actually enact them – including when organising this kind of event. I appreciate that this has not always made your life the easiest, but I fully believe that it was worth the efforts that you went through.

Lastly, I would also like to thank all the participants that you have taken your time to travel here with the objective of sharing, networking and hopefully also catalysing new opportunities for cooperation.

May you have a fruitful conference with lots of new insights as well as new friendships.

Thank you very much for your attention.

His Eminence Sheikh Haj Hussein Muhammad, Fahmina Institute (Read out)

Worldwide, we are witnessing a rise in movements promoting radicalism and hatred speeches, which cannot be ignored. Recalling Martin Luther words, we need to continuously learn to coexist. This statement couldn't be timelier today. Violence can and should never be justified in the realm of Islam. The Koran pledges to respect all human beings/all ways of life. As moderate Muslims, it is our duty to disseminate this vision of respect and coexistence.

We believe that these challenges can be overcome and this is precisely the spirit of this event.



H.E. Sheikh Haj Hussein Muhammad, Fahmina Institute

Part III: Highlights of Discussions²

CONVERSATIONS WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS: “HOW IS RELIGION HELPFUL or HARMFUL TO SOCIAL COHESION?”



The religious leaders affirmed that “religion is here” – i.e. in most places around the world, and especially in the Asian context, religion remains a crucial aspect personal and public life. Not only that, religious coexistence is also a common reality throughout the region. While there are majority religions in many Asian countries, religious diversity of populations is the norm.

Indeed, religious leaders, are, and can be, critical agents and drivers for development, peace and social cohesion. “Empowering individuals from within...is what faith does”. The religious leaders also acknowledged the risks and challenges inherent both to their work, and to the role of religion more generally. While they agreed that beliefs/religions “as such” are not harmful, (e.g. no religion teaches violence), they nevertheless agreed that the acceptance and promotion

² Notes taken by EU Consultant Ms. Bea Sans Corrella and edits by UNFPA Lead SLE Facilitator, Dr. Azza Karam.

of polarisation, and even of violence, is linked to certain interpretations made by “some extremist groups”. Nevertheless, they maintained that this is in and of itself, an important message that religious leaders can reinforce: i.e. that “religions are not the problem... rather it is how certain groups interpret religious narratives”.

The question articulated by some religious leaders is this: given there is more awareness today - including within governmental and non-governmental development agencies - around the potential of religion, how can we prevent religions from being instrumentalised, but rather be engaged as equal partners in building more resilient societies?

All religious leaders affirmed, in diverse ways, the value of interfaith dialogue and actions. Interfaith dialogue, they highlighted, is key to transcending the specificities of each religion and to identifying and promoting common messages which foster peace, social cohesion and development. “When we work together, we are so much stronger... We should work hand by hand, heart to heart”.

Discussion Highlights

- Social media can be a very important engagement tool, especially vis-a-vis the youth, to pass the message about the importance of faith and how it can contribute to the empowerment of individuals (starting from within). However, competition between religions is challenging.
- There are controversial topics or areas where certain narratives, or constructs, persist (specifically violence against women/contraception, sexuality and reproductive rights). These topics don't have to be avoided. These issues need to be acknowledged and religious leaders and actors should be able to receive better scientific information and find safe spaces within which to discuss them, stand together against misconceptions, deconstruct existing harmful constructs, and ultimately change the narrative. While this inevitably takes time, there are some successful examples of change in these areas which still require better disseminated.
- On the whole, it was agreed that religious leaders need to:
 - Engage more deliberately and systematically with youth, and we need to be able to address them ‘speaking their language’/using their tools.
 - Be more vocal in peace building and social cohesion and become “role models” to inspire communities and engage with the authorities when needed.
 - Make better use of modern and tested communication approaches & tools to foster dialogue among faith traditions, to approach and educate the media about the value of religions and successes of interfaith collaboration, and to counter constructs of religion which are causing harm.

“religions are not the problem... rather [the challenge] is how certain groups interpret religious narratives”.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGION, DIPLOMACY AND DEVELOPMENT

Religious engagement remains an area which is relatively new for the European Union. To date, the EU has a policy on Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) and a Special Envoy who has been undertaking various aspects of engaging with religious actors.

“Just as there is no one-size (approach) fits all for gender issues and dynamics, there is no one faith-based approach to all aspects of religions in development and diplomacy efforts.”

The United Nations system entities have a relatively longer track record of systematic engagement with diverse religious actors, spanning several decades, and has developed guidelines as well as diverse partnership frameworks. Examples of this are with UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF and UNEP.

Governmental entities have a varied track record in this field, with some, such as Swiss Development Cooperation/SDC supporting UNFPA since 2002 to undertake systematic work on/with religion and culture; and others, such as British DFID, and now the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, undertaking broad consultations with FBOs.

Key issues linked to religion that governmental and intergovernmental entities deal with:

- While some (inter)governmental actors have a wealth of experience in engaging with FBOs, this has not been systematic or structured. Often, in the name of secularism and “non-discrimination”, some of the governmental entities have refrained from giving visibility to such partnerships, and over time, some may have even overlooked the religious inspiration behind some of the NGOs they partner with. As ‘religious engagement’ becomes more topical however, the question now on these governmental policy making tables is how to recalibrate their engagement – including becoming more systematic and informed about the complexity of it – while keeping this balanced with other civil society outreach and support.
- FBOs & religious leaders are already strong allies in several development and diplomacy areas, but this can be expanded. Climate change, health, education, migration, sanitation, nutrition and social cohesion - also in terms of prevention of hate speech, care for children – are traditional development areas where FBOs are significant actors. Meanwhile, there are other areas of development where governmental actors are realising they can significantly scale up progress - such as child marriage (e.g. in Bangladesh). On the diplomacy side, prevention of genocide, peace-building and mediation are areas where religious actors are increasingly recognised as important allies and interlocutors. Thus more and new forms of partnerships with FBOs and religious leaders are required.

Key requirements and recommendations raised by (inter)governmental actors:

- Ensure better and more nuanced understanding of the worlds of religions (faith-based NGOs/FBOs, religious institutions, religious leaders, and community-based groups and networks. Each have distinct structures, ethos, cultures of work and relationships with and within communities.

- Refrain from assuming some form of a blanket ‘faith-based approach’ – or one approach which covers any and all ‘religious’ aspects. This essentialises the roles, existences, modus operandi, beliefs and realities of religions, faith, and believers. Instead, consider being more systematic and sensitive to the roles and contributions of religions in specific contexts. Developing sensitivities to the existence and roles of religion is similar to sensitivities around gender. Just as there is no one-size (approach) fits all gender issues and dynamics, there is no one faith-based approach to all aspects of religions in development and diplomacy efforts.
- Seek to consolidate existing partnerships with FBOs by appreciating the underpinning faith-inspired values and principles, but do not assume this creates expertise on all religion.
- Widen the partnerships and reach out to new FBOs. In this, it is important to be inclusive and culturally sensitive to move “outside our comfort zone” and engage not just with those with whom we share values, but also with those that ‘are afar”, even outside the moderate voices (i.e. extremist voices). As it is however difficult to assess and decide “who is moderate/who is extremist”, the approach that some governments have adopted is that of being inclusive, acknowledging the different perspectives and integrating as many different voices as possible. While this can be resource -consuming, it is an important investment.
- Acknowledge that widening partnerships may entail some risks (e.g. concerns about increasing religious influence by traditional partners such as human rights-based NGOs on the one hand, and attempts to seek legitimacy for working on select human rights only by faith-based partners who seek to limit the human rights narrative and engagement, on the other), which governments and their partners should be aware of and less risk-averse to/about.
- Be deliberate about learning from and taking stock of existing governments’ engagement with FBOs so far. In this regard, ensure that lessons are learned from identifying working with FBOs on difficult and sensitive areas (such as sexual and reproductive health), not just from relatively safer and uncontested issues (e.g. environment).
- Support safe spaces for sensitive dialogues between governmental actors and faith based NGOs, secular NGOs and religious leaders, where there is respective and open sharing of experiences and challenges. This SLE is a case in point.
- Broaden the policy-making consultations to enrich multi-stakeholder engagement – i.e. include faith based actors with secular NGOs, media, and private sector, including better integration of FBOs and religious leaders in the spaces for dialogue which donors make available/facilitate/ broker at country level (e.g. when preparing new national action plans/country strategies/ SDG policies, etc.)
- Integrate regional institutions (like ASEAN) which always have an instrumental role in the discussions and analysis of policies as well as dissemination of good experiences across countries

NON-GOVERNMENTAL PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGION-DIPLOMACY AND DEVELOPMENT

Key interventions

- There is a need for more “safe & open” spaces for dialogue across faiths and across different actors (i.e. inter religious dialogue and cooperation mechanisms). This is a priority area in several countries, particularly in countries affected or prone to conflict, where a number of NGOs are already engaging, promoting inter-faith (and even broader) dialogue. These spaces should be built and/or strengthened, adding more stakeholders (also international organisations, other CSOs, authorities, etc).
- Several NGOs are playing an instrumental brokering role in engaging religious leaders and in balancing religiosity with modern Nation State claims (e.g. in such areas as family planning/child protection/etc). Experience shows how, for certain topics, if properly engaged and enabled, religious leaders can become “champions” in their communities and, more generally, in their societies. There are several positive examples in Indonesia (e.g. in child protection/ in the relief efforts in Lombok).
- There are a number of well-tested methodologies and approaches to engage with local religious leader and communities, which can be further amplified/replicated (e.g. the programme [Channels of Hope](#), which works on different areas, such as HIV, child protection etc / the work of ACT Alliance with religious leaders to address natural disasters/ in the framework of the humanitarian nexus). This work doesn’t come however without challenges, as it is often difficult to accommodate the different perspectives.
- NGOs can (and often) play an important intermediary role between donors and local religious leaders and communities, considering their knowledge of donor systems and procedures (not always accessible to small organisations/ actors which organise themselves outside the donor logic).
- NGOs can also play a bridging between the religious and the governmental spheres. There are also a number of interesting initiatives where NGOs are taking religion to the academic and governmental spheres, in an effort to enable the conversation.

Facilitators' Observations from Day 1:

Compared to the first SLE discussions in 2010, and over the annual iterations of these conversations, there are some interesting – if not remarkable - developments:

(Inter)governmental actors are more nuanced in assessing their challenges of engagement with faith actors, and determined to undertake further work with them; Religious actors are undertaking (and sharing) far more multi-faith initiatives (not limited to ecumenical (intra-Christian), and have clear inclinations to continue to do multi-faith collaborative development work.

This mutual “normalisation” has been possible, in part, thanks to the trust established through the convening of these conversations by the United Nations. The SLE methodology engages a hybrid of policy makers and practitioners, based on clear criteria and relationships developed and refined and revisited over time, to meet in “a safe space”.

PART IV – CASE STUDIES MARKET CAFE

RECAP

[For governmental entities] the question that needs to be asked is whether we need siloed mechanisms for faith-based engagement, or should we, instead, promote the use of existing civil society partnership and engagement mechanisms, making them more faith-sensitive, or faith-inclusive?

INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION IS A REALITY: As evidenced yesterday, there is already a rich wealth of inter-faith cooperation initiatives happening, especially at ground level. There is however a need for more spaces for dialogue and to make these exchanges and dialogue more systematic.

NEVERTHELESS not all faith based actors, indeed faith-based NGOs, feel comfortable in a multi stakeholder/inter-faith dialogue set up. Some prefer bilateral approaches (faith to faith or faith to government). Therefore, the inter-faith approach should not be taken for granted. Preferences of diverse faith actors should be appreciated, and inclusiveness should be attempted when possible.

DIVERSITY: There is no such thing as a faith-based approach (as a blue print), but rather faith-sensitive approaches.

OPEN THE TENT? It was argued by some that engagement needs to happen not just with the moderate and more open voices but also with the “more conservative” actors. Some even advocated for engagement with the “more radical” voices. There was consensus that addressing the root causes of narratives which incite violent action need to be a collective responsibility. In terms of countering extremist narratives, questions were raised as to what would equip governmental and/or non-governmental actors to convene the diverse actors or mediate a dialogue, and under which circumstances this could/should be considered.

FBOS AS PART OF THE BROADER CIVIC FABRIC: There are already several mechanisms to promote engagement between donors and Civil Society. Both donors and CSOs have been elaborating them, particularly over the past decade. The question that needs to be asked is whether we need siloed mechanisms for faith-based engagement, or should we, instead, promote the use of

existing civil society partnership and engagement mechanisms, making them more faith-sensitive or faith-inclusive?

THE POWER OF RELIGION: Religion may be perceived as the root cause of a number of problems (i.e. gender-based violence, conflict, etc). Recognizing the roles religions play in conflicts and acts of violence is useful in order to find the appropriate approach to addressing the challenges. Often, religious actors, and narratives, may be required to become part of the resolution.

Presentation of the On-Line Course Religion and Development

The course provides a basic introduction to the interaction between religion and development in order to build robust multilateral partnerships and to effectively plan, implement and evaluate programmes that are faith- and culture-sensitive.

The course is aimed for anyone engaged in advocacy, development and humanitarian work, whether a faith actor or work for a secular organisation. It consists of 10 modules of around 10-15 minutes, which can easily be used in combination with face-to-face workshops. Modules 1-3 focus on key information about religion and development, partnerships and planning, and Modules 4-10 focus on different thematic areas. The course was co-produced by ACT Alliance, Danida, GIZ and Swedish Mission Council.

The course can be accessed here: <https://fabo.org/enrol/?id=531>

THEMATIC DISCUSSIONS and key messages

SDG16 (I): Building Peace and Fostering Inclusion in Conflict

The Facilitator introduced a creative analytical exercise to explore the relation between conflict and religion involving drawings. Some of the key issues that were discussed are:

- How some religious narratives embrace violence.
- How majority religions relate to minatory groups.
- The role of the media enhancing negative news/ under reporting positive news.
- Lessons learned:
 - Work with religious scholars is very important to rectify the harmful interpretations of religious narratives. They have the moral authority.
 - Work with media and better use of social media to enhance positive news and minimize hate speech (i.e. engagement with FB providers in Myanmar/ monitor social media with algorithms to identify hate speech).
 - Include diverse groups into political processes and dialogues

- Youth engagement using adapted tools (e.g. social media).
- Action-focused inter-faith engagement (not necessarily calling it as such) around common topics of concern, and often simply convening the dialogues.

SDG16 (II) CHILD PROTECTION

- Child protection requires a very careful and tailored approach, when engaging with the families, the parents, and the communities. It has to be culturally and faith sensitive.
- Belief systems and mandates of most religious communities encourage involvement in the communities. Several religious communities are often community-based service providers, providing care and support for children and vulnerable persons, and providing spiritual support and stability in difficult circumstances.
- The participation of religious communities often leads to interventions that are more organic and better grounded in the communities and their shared value systems.
- In cases where child protection actors (i.e. NGOs, Inter governmental organisations) developed strong relationships with religious communities over time, the work at the onset of emergencies is more efficient and effective.
- Children should be included in designing and delivering the interventions. They can even become role models for their parents and communities.

2.3.3. SDG5: GENDER

- Several interesting case studies show how working closer with the religious leaders help influence the narrative/ shape opinions in the communities in difficult/controversial issues, such as child marriage, reproductive health, etc.
- Engagement with other stakeholders, which are important for the community (e.g. local authorities, local police forces, etc.) is also paramount. In this religious leaders can help, considering their prominent position/legitimacy in the community, also vis-a-vis the authorities. Experience shows how programmes addressing sensitive issues (i.e. child marriage, gender violence sexual reproductive health, can benefit from broad partnerships, involving different stakeholders, with different roles and backgrounds.
- In many places, experience show how women can be change makers with a deeper understanding of the conflict issues and are capable of transcending their own beliefs systems. There is a need to actively promote women leadership.
- Trust-building is key and needs time. The process is very important and requires due attention.
- Many of the most successful examples start from and tap into the skills and potential of the individual, families and the communities, by:
 - putting them at the very centre of the programmes and proposed solutions
 - using also frameworks and terms that speak to them (e.g. concept of family resilience/ notion of emotional bank account developed in Indonesia)
 - helping them develop self-awareness and ultimately empowering them.

2.3.4. SDG3: HEALTH

Key issues:

- Health is a recurrent but evolving issue. Any intervention requires a time-frame that is long term.
- While several FBOs are strongly involved in health, others don't perceive health as a priority. It often comes as a secondary issue.
- The extensive experience, strengths and capacities of FBOs, and their rooting in the communities, offer a unique opportunity to improve health outcomes.
- There is a need to cultivate sustained relationships between the authorities and religious leaders and to build trust.
- Several innovations were identified: MSH dialogue in Pakistan to discuss family planning preceded by bilateral discussions to build trust).

Recommendations:

- Engagement with media is critical, as well as with NGOs, especially in conflict affected zones.
- Better use regional platforms (e.g. ASEAN)
- Adopt a broader notion of health, to encompass dimensions other than physical health (e.g. mental health, spirituality, etc.)
- Ensure the involvement of FBOs, using MoU, in health steering committees at and project level, but also at sectoral level
- Better links need to be established between religious leaders and inter-governmental organisations and donors dealing with health.

2.3.5. SDG13-15: ENVIRONMENT/CLIMATE CHANGE

Working on environment creates a common language across communities

- There is a growing awareness about the environment and climate change amongst religious leaders and FBOs. Worldwide, faith-based actors are becoming more vocal and involved in a number of initiatives, ranging from the local to the global level. In so doing, some are also building alliances with secular organisations and other actors.
- We are already witnessing change happening in several communities (starting at the individual level) but more action is needed.
- There are still several challenges which need to be tackled, where religious leaders and FBOs can contribute: poverty and lack of voice for certain groups, inter institutional challenges and lack of trust, lack of literacy on climate change, etc.
- Development should be people-centred and there is a need to make better use of influential people.

COMMON CHALLENGES – A summary of what matters to the nexus on religion-development-diplomacy across sectors

- Narratives and language. Religious discourse, jurisprudential exegesis or commonly understood cultural interpretations thereof, are critical to the work of/with/about religion.
- The political environment. Political will, or lack thereof, and use of religion by political regimes can be a ‘deal breaker’ not only in terms of whether to engage with religious actors (and vice versa) but also in terms of agenda setting for the nature of the work on/with religion.
- Dissonance in time frames. Where governments and intergovernmental institutions have set time frames, religious leaders and institutions often work to very different time frames. This impacts on building resilience, perceptions by communities and trust building.
- Religious demography. This includes issues relevant to majority-minority relations, as well as urban-rural differences, and efforts sustained by religious institutions versus those undertaken by NGOs and/or by other community-based groups.
- Institutional memory. In (inter)governmental entities, and some FBOs and religious institutions, turnover of staff (and leadership) means that experiences and learnings of/about/with religion and religious actors are not part of the institutional memory. In turn, this impacts on sustainability of partnership efforts, and also impedes the ability to learn from these partnerships – let alone to learn how to celebrate them.
- Legislation matters systematically, but it is insufficient to bring about the kinds of social and political transformation which (intergovernmental) and non-governmental religious actors may be seeking.
- Lack of financial resources often hampers efforts to scale up good partnership efforts and can impede replication of good practices in similar contexts.
- Commodification and instrumentalisation of religion and religious actors - as religion becomes one of the axis of foreign policy and development praxis, there is an emerging concern that the perceptions and work with “religion” are being perceived as yet another tool in usual policy and planning, thus risking us all to lose touch with the fact that what is being ‘worked with’, or ‘used’ ultimately relates to the deepest of human emotions – i.e. people’s sense of faith.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this work with and about religions, we need to ask ourselves: are we in this work because we are seeking to build new organisations, or to further careers? Or are we seeking to serve - and to serve as believers in shared values?

If it is to serve (whether we believe in a religion or in human rights or any service ethic), then we need neither fear nor lament being on the margins - for all movements of social justice emerge from the margins.

Whereas empire building and consolidation of careers, organisations, and power politics, requires the limelight, the ethos of service, does not.

Azza Karam, Lead Facilitator, SLE

This regional SLE has enriched and reinforced much of the wisdom gleaned from a decade of hosting Strategic Learning Exchanges. Some of the common threads emerging from the rich discussions taking place between governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental practitioners of development and foreign affairs, can be summarised in the following:

- Learning: Learned engagement is a prerequisite for outreach whether with religious leaders, with faith-based NGOs/FBOs, or religious scholars. This requires appreciating the diverse and often nuanced roles each of these 'religious actors' play in service and advocacy with their communities, taking into account issues of legitimacy, as well as their reputation among peers and with their developmental counterparts.
- Innovation - Innovative work can be undertaken with the media, especially with social media (e.g. monitoring of hate speech). There is a need for more media literacy.
- Change - Youth and women are critical agents of change and thus constituencies any partner should be paying more systematic attention to. Women of faith deserve special attention and special support, also given their respective and collective voices and asks.
- Comparison - Comparative exchanges are extremely valuable, comparing contexts and experiences both from South to South but also North to South.
- Formalisation - In partnership modalities, informal exchanges have their value, but written & formal agreements may also be required, as a means to acknowledge and formalise the parameters of the partnerships.
- Holistic approaches - Not perceiving religious actors and reaching out to them in a siloed manner, can provide value added and enrich support to (inter)governmental partners. Unlike secular development and foreign policy categories, religious organisations tend to work on multiple and diverse issues from within the same institutional infrastructure. This different approach may enable more inclusion and

inclusivity as well as intersectionality. A more deliberately inclusive approach is helpful (some even refer to “radical inclusivity”) as a way to reach out to different civil society groups, including beyond the FBO communities (i.e. bridging with the wider secular and humanist civic actors).

Again and again, the issue of challenging the way development and foreign affairs are conducted – even understood - emerged. The aspiration is sometimes voiced that (Inter)governmental organisations in particular, could benefit from partnering with faith actors, not only as means to enhance service delivery to the margins, but also because this could possibly lead to ‘doing things differently’. The motivations and inspirations of religious work can often differ from other value-driven engagement. Thus the question often asked in these experiential exchanges is this: while all work is value-driven, can religious inspiration at least positively challenge traditional modus operandi – and thus also deconstruct existing paradigms of thought and praxis?

PART V: List of UN SLE Participants

Your name	Title/Position	Representation	Organization Name	Country
Roel van der Veen	Prof/Head of Political Affairs	Governmental	Embassy of the Netherlands	Netherlands
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