



Interfaith Dialogue in Line with the High-Level Meeting on the New Urban Agenda Multi-Religious and Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration for the Advancement of New Urban Agenda: How Far Have We Come? Where to Next?

[Tuesday, 26 April 2022 9:00 – 10:30 a.m](#)

777 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, and Virtual via Zoom

Background

As the United Nations General Assembly meets to discuss the effective implementation of the New Urban Agenda on 28 April 2022, the World Evangelical Alliance, *Religions for Peace* and UN-Habitat considered it timely to reflect on the fruitful partnerships between urban-relevant actors such as UN-Habitat, faith-based leaders, and faith-based organisations and consequently they decided to partner to organise an official side-event to the High Level Meeting to provide a space to acknowledge and consider past and recent developments on efforts towards sustainable urban development and to share ideas for working together in the future.

Agenda and Report

1. Moment of Silence
2. Welcoming and Opening Remarks

Prof. Azza Karam, Secretary General, Religions for Peace

- In her opening remarks Dr. Azza Karam, Secretary General of *Religions for Peace*, welcomed all speakers and participants to the event. She further explained that this interfaith dialogue, which is in line with the High-Level Meeting on the new urban agenda, is purposed to discuss multi religious and multi stakeholder collaboration for the advancement of this New Urban Agenda.
- Two questions will largely be posed today: *How far have we come* and *where do we go next?*
- Dr. Karam explains that we all know that urbanization is a major force; even though they only occupy 2% of the total land area (2016), cities are responsible for 70% of gross domestic product, and cities are consuming 60% of energy, and produce 70% of greenhouse gas emissions whilst 70% of our global waste originates in cities
- At the global level, the increasing impact of cities has been reflected in several frameworks for sustainable development: global conferences between 1976 and 2016 each produced guidance for urban development. After the Habitat One global summit the intergovernmental body was created which developed into today's UN habitat, the United Nations human settlements program which is specifically mandated by the UN General Assembly to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns. The Habitat Three global summit brought forth the ***New Urban Agenda which is the subject of our conversation today.*** This is intended as an action-oriented document to set global standards of achieving urban Sustainable Development Goal number 11 and to help us rethink the way we build, manage, and live in cities.
- Amidst all the conflicts in the world, it is time that religious actors work together, and this is the other focus of the conversation today: ***how can faith actors, religious institutions, religious leaders, religious communities, and faith communities collaboratively contribute together towards a new, more sustainable, world?***

Prof. Dr. Thomas Schirmacher, Secretary General, World Evangelical Alliance and Co-President, Religions for Peace

- In his opening remarks and in his capacity as the Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance Dr. Schirmacher is greeting everyone on behalf of 600 million Christians around the world, many of which live, work, and play in large cities and whose daily living reality and lives are shaped by cities and who in their turn shape cities. DR. Schirmacher continues to explain that:
- Urban settlements have a specific theological relevance for Christians, as the Bible teaches us that mankind was created in a garden, but ultimately humanity lives in the city, at the end of all times.
- We are delighted to be co-hosting this interface dialogue as we have enjoyed many years of good cooperation with both partners, UN-Habitat and *Religions for Peace*.
- The World Evangelical Alliance was one of the few religious organizations that participated in the United Nations Habitat Three global summit as we convened a parallel event that Habitat Three would use to campaign a statement on cities requested by Christian organizations worldwide that explicitly supports the new urban agenda entitled the ***“Gospel and the future of cities, a call to action”***.
- Thus, we are very happy to be able to support the next chapter of faith engagement actively and to work towards a stronger cooperation with all the speakers today and UN-Habitat.

Mr. Andre Dzikus, Head, Urban Basic Service, UN-Habitat

- In his opening remarks and as official representative of UN-Habitat, Mr. Andre Dzikus head of the Urban Basic Service at UN-Habitat, announces it a great pleasure to participate in the Interfaith Dialogue on the New Urban Agenda and extends the gratitude of Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director of UN-Habitat, to the speakers on sharing these important interventions today. Mr. Dzikus further emphasizes that:
- UN-Habitat encourages this joint initiative because it considers it a strengthening of the working relationship between UN-Habitat and faith-based organisations who have a vital role to play in implementing the New Urban Agenda. UN-Habitat implements the agenda with Member States, but it recognizes that faith-based partners are important actors in achieving the overall goal. Therefore, UN-Habitat is happy to partner in this Interfaith Dialogue and considers it a very good journey to start off.
- The New Urban Agenda is a tool for localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) especially on a city level, but also for other critical teachings which should be addressed at the local level. UN-Habitat feels strongly that faith-based organizations play a very, very crucial role at the local level.
- We must keep in mind that one in three people live in slums and that they are facing challenges in cities. These challenges present a strong reflection of how widespread the inequalities of civil liberties are. The question is: *how can we address these challenges?* There is a significance of urbanization for sustainable development through which we can continue to improve the quality of life. Therefore, it signified a real turning point when the UN agenda was adopted, and we saw that cities became a part of that agenda.
- We are increasingly seeing that cities are the solution for addressing challenges, and that if we manage cities well, there are great opportunities for reducing poverty and inequality.

3. Framing the Issue

Dr. Chris Elisara, Co-Director, Sustainability Center, World Evangelical Alliance

- Dr. Chris Elisara, co-director of the Sustainability Center for the World Evangelical Alliance, underscores the importance of today’s Interfaith Dialogue as part of the formal side events that UN-Habitat High Level Meeting on the New Urban Agenda which comes six years after Habitat III and the ratification of the New Urban Agenda (<https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/> and <https://unhabitat.org/the-new-urban-agenda-illustrated>). Dr. Elisara continues to explain the framework and objective of today’s panel as follows:
- The purpose of this dialogue is to put theory into action: to have more collaboration, to be more effective, and to have greater impact in cities globally.

- The intended outcome, as stated in the concept note, is for this dialogue to help set the table for substantial follow up work and dialogue and to plan next steps in the "***formation of an international representative specialist urban expert multi-faith body that can work with UN-Habitat and other UN agencies and international bodies.***"
- Yesterday morning (April 25th) during their High Level Event the World Urban Campaign (which is the civil society and advocacy arm of UN-Habitat), launched "[The City We Need Now](#)," which is an updating of the seminal *City We Need 2.0* statement produced in 2016 by the World Urban Campaign to influence Habitat III and the New Urban Agenda. *The City We Need Now* includes 10 principles and action items. It is the first UN-Habitat document of this type of time that Dr. Elisara is aware of that explicitly affirms and encourages faith-based organizations to be committed to sustainable cities (principle #4 action item #4).
- Another positive example is the UN-Habitat Flagship Program [SDG Cities](#) whose new strategic roadmap includes faith-based communities as one of their six implementation windows with the details to be filled out starting with a convening at [WUF11](#) (we encourage registration for WUF11 as many of the side-events will be in hybrid format).
- It took six years for religious institutions, faith leaders and Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) to start playing an increasing role in the urban dialogue, with significant events including the first Faith-Based Urban Thinkers Campus in 2017. This gathering produced the historic "Singapore Declaration," a multi-faith statement acknowledging the necessity of faith-based perspectives, and working relationships with faith-based organizations, for the success of the New Urban Agenda (NUA).
- Today's dialogue, and the follow-up work that is planned, is purposed to create an interfaith inclusive path towards substantive engagement and meaningful FBO contributions to the 2nd UN Habitat Assembly in 2023. Thus, we are in an unprecedented historic moment of mutual welcoming, and we can and should build on this opportunity for mutual agreement and collaboration between religions and UN-Habitat to create "the cities we need now" through planning, building, and fixing what's not currently working.
- Lastly, Dr. Elisara also emphasizes the importance of pressing into more dialogue—dialogue between FBO's and UN-Habitat, deep dialogue *within* faith traditions about cities, and deep dialogue *between* faith traditions about their respective faith perspectives on cities and the practices, tools, and resources they bring to bear on advancing just and sustainable cities for all. Such exchange and dialogue will help FBO's and UN-Habitat maximize the impact of their work.

4. Multi-religious Perspectives

Moderated by Mr. Daniel Perell, Representative to the United Nations, Bahá'í International, New York

- Mr. Daniel Perell, representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations in New York, presents today's interfaith panel as a whirlwind tour of different dimensions and intersections between faith-based actors and the new urban agenda.
- He expresses experiencing an honest fear to cities as they are exaggerated examples of the unsustainable characteristics of human nature – he makes a comparison with the homunculus model.
- The homunculus model represents a caricature of the way our brain perceives our physical body, it is an exaggerated representation of what really matters to the human brain. Likewise, cities, to Mr. Perell, present an over exaggeration of those factors that humanity deems most important, in other words "of human ideals": acquisition, wealth preservation, and sustainable consumption are very visible in cities whilst the human ideals that are missing are only scarcely visible.
- If our ideals are misaligned, the homunculus city (the cities we see instead of the cities we need) is not a pleasant sight. The hope today is to guide the conversation in a direction in which those ideals that are articulated in all the great faith traditions could become exaggeratedly visible in cities and communities.
- Mr. Perell hopes that this Interfaith Dialogue can aspire to create cities as places where trust and trustworthiness are found in every corner and where sustainability is flourishing and is at the heart of our engagement.

Priestess Beatriz Schulthess; President, Indigenous Peoples Ancestral Spiritual Council; Honorary President, Religions for Peace; Indigenous; Costa Rica

- Priestess Beatriz Schulthess, president of the Indigenous Peoples Ancestral Spiritual Council in Costa Rica, commences by sharing that indigenous peoples always speak strongly about the fact that human beings are *interdependent with all that exists on the face of mother earth*. Interdependence is part of the indigenous Cosmo vision and consequents in the indigenous approach to (sustainable) living. They consider themselves, as human beings, as possessing an innate responsibility: to be guardians of Mother Earth. She continues her intervention as follows:
- Communities, cities, and nation states similarly are dependent on their immediate relations: their neighbors the land which they encompass, industries, its inhabitants, etc. Most certainly cities are dependent on the earth as provider of natural resources: the means that enables humanity to produce everything it needs, including places to live such as cities. As sustainable development goal 11 aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable we also must understand that SDG 11 is interdependent with all the other SDGs.
- Priestess Schulthess emphasizes that local to global decision-making should therefor also be comprised of an interdependent approach: rather operating in boxes and silos, we must see the whole picture. For example, cities may incorporate the most advanced technology, but the cities and its technology will still depend on their immediate surroundings, the rural areas which is why it is only logical that sustainable cities cannot be developed without the sustainable development of rural areas.
- According to the World Bank, by 2050 7 out of 10 people will be living in a city. This implies that Sustainable Urbanization, and the eradication of poverty and inequality are extremely urgent. We must start creating cities that have the capacity to take care of everyone and change urbanization policies that only favor privileged and wealthy people.
- Lastly, Priestess Schulthess concludes that the trend for ‘green and sustainability cities’ is certainly an excellent and much needed trend, mainly when citizens of all socio-economic classes can be part of such efforts. In Brazil for example, unemployed people found interest and pleasure in planting vegetables in three areas provided by the city. Such initiatives for vulnerable people positively contribute to food security, improve their physical and psychological well-being, and simultaneously create greener cities.

Rabbi Daniel Swartz, Temple Hesed, Pennsylvania

- In his intervention Rabbi Daniel Swartz, Executive Director of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, shares from his 30-year experience in working across the Jewish community on environmental issues. He explains that:
- The desire of societies to have a new and improved vision for the city dates all the way back to Prophet Jeremiah. In the teachings of the sages, we see both positive and negative commandments with regards to cities: positive requirements for urban green areas and the planting of trees in cities date back more than 2000 years. The prohibition of unhealthy practices and the regulation of industrial areas in cities are ancient concerns that have been recognized for millennia, even if they have been all too often ignored. The word ‘Shalom’ even means so much more than ‘peace in terms of absence of war’, it means wholeness and wellbeing. Thus, our new vision of the city needs to be: *to create ‘peaceful’ cities where people live in well-being and wholeness.*
- To build a new generation of those cities we, as religious leaders, need to consider the underpinning values that we find in our different faith traditions. A Jewish viewpoint, for example, is the notion of connection, the notion that the environment, people, and cities are connected. However, the challenge is that when most people, even esteemed religious leaders present here today, envision the environment they see it as something distant and as separate from people. The environment is everywhere, wherever we are and so is certainly the urban environment. To create healthy urban environments, we first need to understand that the environment is exactly where we are, it is not separated from us.
- Rabbi Swartz concludes with a short story which provides an excellent example to that notion of connection: in Leviticus a Rabbi tells a story of people sitting in a ship. One person decides to drill a hole under their seat not

understanding the alarming response of his fellow travelers. He is simply and only drilling under his seat so what is the problem? His fellow travelers remind him that by doing that, he is in fact sinking the whole ship. This hyper individualistic approach to life needs to change towards an approach of connection, not only in terms of our obligation to justice but for the purpose of love and the consequences of our actions. Religions can play an important role in making that change.

Ms. Ana-Maria Daou, Head of Research and Courses Unit, Adyan Foundation Beirut Lebanon

- Ms. Ana-Maria Daou, Head of Research and Courses Unit at the Adyan Foundation, opens her intervention with the following words: “we have always heard that urbanization was and still is a transformative trend”. It is important to point that out because:
- With everything the world has been facing the past couple of years from climate change challenges to the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been hard to see how urban transformation can indeed be for the better.
- The Quito declaration on ‘sustainable cities and human settlements for all’ or the ‘New Urban Agenda’ highlights that the persistence of multiple forms of poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation remain among the major obstacles to sustainable development, worldwide. In countries like Lebanon these problems are often exacerbated by corruption, a lack of good governance, political clientelism and hate speech.
- Therefore, I would like to focus on my intervention today on three main things:
 - First, on the educational level. Adyan Foundation has provided non-formal training classes to students non on issues related to identity, social cohesion, diversity, management, religious, and social responsibility, inclusive citizenship, and other related topics. We encouraged groups of students from different backgrounds to break barriers and work together on joint community initiatives. Additionally, we provided them with in-person and virtual tours to heritage sites. All these efforts are aimed at breaking mental and cultural barriers.
 - Second, on the level of the involvement of faith-based actors which is highlighted in the Quito Declaration. In 2019, Adyan Foundation launched the forum for religious, social responsibility, which includes religious leaders, faith-educators, and media professionals working on religious media fields with the purpose to promote the concept of religious and social responsibility, which, just like CSR places responsibility on faith actors and institutions.
 - The third and final level, the community level, where Adyan Foundation has responded to a disaster emergency, the 2020 Beirut explosion, by distributing food, medicine, and other essential supplies, as well as psychosocial support for thousands of citizens and non-citizens who were affected. This immediate response highlights how intimate urbanization is and how globalization should be directed towards positively transformative change down to the regional and community level.
- By adopting this multi-level approach, both top down and bottom up and participatory, we can develop methods and tools and properly apply these to localize sustainable urbanization.

Dr. Aditi Mishal, Chief Sustainability Officer, Govardhan Ecovillage

- Today, Ms Mishal - Chief Sustainability Officer of Govardhan Ecovillage - presents a model to live in love and harmony with purposeful action for a better future for all. The positive solution towards sustainable and harmonious development of cities and urban areas. Today Ms. Mishal shares the following:
- Manual scavenging is a significant problem in India. At the same time, India and Pakistan are experiencing the worst heat wave since 1965 which has caused many deaths. Climate change is evidently presenting a huge problem in sustainable urbanization. Urbanization and heat rise have exacerbated the problem of manual scavenging. Unsustainable sanitation poses an immediate threat to sustainable urbanization, and it is vital that we solve this problem in India.
- A solution to this problem and towards achieving SDG11 can be provided by smart ECO villages in urban areas with faith-based organizations at the heart, funding through corporate sponsors, support from the indigenous community and tribal leaders, and strengthened by sustainable technology through science and

technology partners and made possible with the support of governmental agencies. Govardhan Ecovillage is a living example of that solution and of a very concrete and realistic method to achieve SDG11.

Ms Molly Burhans, Founder and Executive Director, GoodLands, New York

- Ms. Molly Burhans, Founder and Executive Director of Goodlands, emphasizes that the the interconnection of sustainability practices is hugely important for environmental and urban management. This is one of the reasons she founded Goodlands with a mission to making land work for good.
- A concrete example of sustainable urbanization initiatives she has worked on is transforming old industrial buildings and cities through urban farming. With Goodlands, since 2016, Ms. Burhans has worked on the development of the first global map of the major world religion history. An initiative that answered to the challenge of understanding our environment. Mapping land ownership and environmental realities provides a clear overview of responsibility and action steps but amongst religious institutions there may be fear that mapping will lead to suppression.
- Ms. Burhans explains that the catholic network is the largest NGO network with plenty of sustainability ideas and insufficient implementation which is important to mention because faith-based organizations own 8% of the global environment and 5% of global forests. And then I found a good lands because perhaps a naive it when I was kind of discerning vocations, I started looking around the world gosh the Catholic health care system operates 26% of healthcare facilities globally and Catholic education, the largest non-governmental network of education and we must run the largest network of conservation right.
- The most important and urgent mission of humanity today is to not let the planet be destroyed and to look beyond conflict and destruction to ensure that humanity can flourish in peace and harmony. When we step back and consider this, we realise that it means that all SDGs, especially those that concern the environment, are interconnected, and affected by (religious) conflict.
- Religious institutions need to work together to implement their great ideas. The Catholic Church has a very structured organization, and many good ideas circulate in the institution, but the implementation of those ideas is lacking. Multi-religious efforts can help in finding improved approaches on governing assets , corporate management, and the sharing of values.

Sheikh Ebraheem Ssali, Executive Secretary, African Forum for Muslim Councils; Member, Governing Board of African Council of Religious Leaders-Religions for Peace, Uganda

- Sheikh Ebraheem Ssali, executive Secretary of the African Forum for Muslim Councils, expresses his gratitude for the opportunity to join this important meeting today, a meeting with a multi-stakeholder significance that can bring far reaching results to multi-religious cooperation in implementing the New Urban Agenda.
- The African Forum for Muslims Council has not been involved much with the New Urban Agenda and sustainable urbanization thus Sheikh Ssali acknowledges the potential of this participation today for bringing the New Urban Agenda to the agenda of the forum and to encourage African Muslim leaders to join on sustainability efforts. Religious inclusion is very significant in obtaining sustainability goals. He simultaneously recognizes the importance of the inclusion of religious institutions and faith actors in UN-Habitat efforts.
- Sheikh Ebraheem expresses a deep respect for the religious leaders that have a powerful role in shaping attitudes and opinions, and who move beyond the politics of their work.
- Sheik Ebraheem concludes by explaining that sustainability is in alignment with the Islamic perspective. Islamic traditions include a myriad of positive and significant teachings towards sustainable living. Islamic teachings embody principles and values on which sustainable living should be based, such as principles related to the environmental resource utilization, preservation of the natural balance, the permittance of God for humans to utilize sources of life in a manner which is not depleting but enjoys and values the beauty of creation.

Prof. Omar Cortes, Executive Director, Chilean Association of Interreligious Dialogue for Human Development; Religions for Peace Chile

- In his intervention Mr. Omar Cortes Gaibur, Executive Director of the Chilean Association of Interreligious Dialogue, refers to the philosophy of Mr. Bob Martin Buber. Buber's philosophy was centered around human encounter and dialogue, particularly exemplified in the relation with other men but ultimately resting on and pointing to the relation with God. This human-to-human and human-to-God dialogue ultimately becomes an educational praxis: each of the dialogue participants has in mind the other or others in their present being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between him- or herself and them.
- At the city administrator's office in Santiago (City Hall) they have taken this philosophy into practice: an interreligious dialogue council was founded by the mayor, and it consists of religious leaders, civil servants, and city representatives. The council convenes monthly with the mayor to discuss the critical situation in respective neighborhoods. This dialogue welcomes different faith traditions to talk about ways to improve public spaces.
- Public spaces in Chile are subject to a lot of violence which is why urban planning and the inter-connectivity of the influences of different (faith) traditions is so vital the sustainability planning. The meetings of the council have also resulted in increased bike use and the greening of the city through sustainable means of transportation, planting trees, and energy.

Ms. Merylene Chitharai, Religions for Peace Interfaith Youth Network, South Africa

- Ms. Merylene Chitharai, member of the Religions for Peace Youth Initiative, opens her intervention by stating that we live in times of great socio-economic and environmental difficulties: overpopulation, over pollution, shortages of basic facilities, poorly maintained architectural infrastructures which lead to decreased resilience, climate change, mass consumption, etc.
- The problems of today show us that we live in spiritual disharmony with mother earth and that life is asking us to pause, reflect and take another course of action: a sustainable course that holds the values and ethics of spirituality and religions. This course can be taken if we all develop an 'eco-consciousness'.
- To answer the question on how to build sustainable and inclusive cities from a multi-religious perspective, Ms. Chitharai provides the following suggestions:
 - We need to shift our mindset at both the national grassroots and global policy level
 - Religious institutions should lead by example
 - Multi-religious platforms provide creative solution-orientated opportunities
 - We need to bring about a revolution in consciousness: eco-consciousness
 - We need to inviting green technologies and become sustainable hubs
 - Faith structures need to live by example by inviting organic solutions and creating a support structure
 - Faith institutions can turn religious places of worship into sustainability examples: organic gardens to feed the community, green electricity, rainwater harvesting, and passive design principles
- Ms. Chitharai closes by concluding that these efforts, when connected to other multi-stakeholder platforms, can provide a support structure for the world to become more sustainable.

Summary and Results

In her concluding remarks, Prof. Azza Karam, Secretary General of Religions for Peace, expressed her appreciation for the work of the panel. She then summarizes the key points and steps-for-action which were brought up today:

- The value of faith in international discourse and to the solving of global problems should continuously be highlighted: the importance of faith communities and faith leaders is never emphasized enough but the multitude of ways in which communities of faith are crucial to moving forward in a sustainable way makes the involvement of multi-religious efforts impossible to deny.

- The multi-religious community needs to hold itself accountable; it needs to practice the United Nations principle of 'accountability' because if the religious community does not, the world will point the finger to us. The mission of religions, working together for peace, is to overcome the differences and if we do not collaborate respectfully and efficiently, we cannot hold anyone else accountable.
- Religious institutions have been invested in creating sustainable environments because they are some of the largest landowners and so, the reality of environmental degradation really concerns the business, and the bread and butter of religious institutions.
- Religious communities were amongst the first to alert us on environmental degradation. We all should remember the name of Dr Vandana Shiva who was one of the first in the 1980s to alert to the fact that we are suffering hugely. Women, in fact, are usually the first to call out on the suffering of humanity because they are out there in the field, and they are trying to look after the children who are on the immediate receiving side.
- Today's dialogue was not a mere conversation, it is the beginning of a journey to bring into create action multi-religious approaches on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.
- It is also important to emphasize that the multi-religious approach includes not only the Abrahamic traditions but also the eastern and indigenous faith traditions which is why it is so important to respect each religious community, whether evangelical, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Buddhist, or Hindu. It is important to acknowledge and credit how each religious community is working towards a sustainable future and to look deliberately at how all faith communities are often also the first to be impacted by global issues, such as the indigenous peoples.