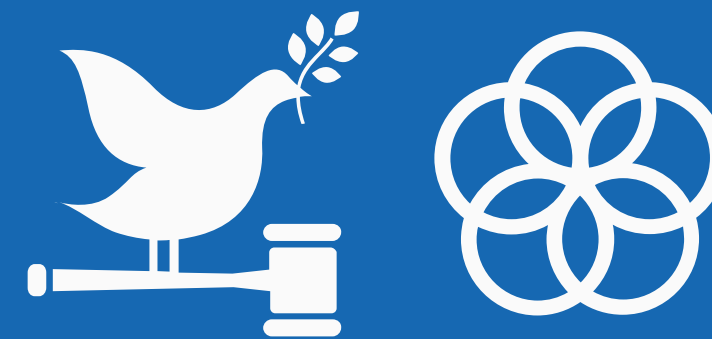# Setting the Norm: Promoting Grassroots Efforts for Sustainable Peace and Development

Background

During the 2015 historic UN Summit, 150 UN Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The success of the 2030 Agenda depends on Member States integrating three interdependent and complementary pillars: economic development, social development, and environmental protection — with inclusivity and human rights at its core. Member States are not solely responsible for the implementation of these goals and targets; their successful implementation depends on an inclusive "whole of society approach" that engenders a sense of shared responsibility in meeting the basic needs of citizens, ensuring no one is left behind.

Although states and governments have proactively integrated the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs into their national plans, the 2019 High-Level Political Forum[1] illuminated that no country is on track to achieve the SDGs.[2] To accelerate actions towards achieving the 2030 Agenda, Member States adopted a Political Declaration (September 2019), in which they pledged to 10 commitments, including "bolstering local action to accelerate implementation: [committing] to empower and support cities, local authorities, and communities.[3]

2020 was meant to be a "super" year, with increased efforts by governments around the world to achieve the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs. However, the COVID-19 virus unleashed an unprecedented crisis, causing further disruption to the international community's social and economic efforts and gains while simultaneously infecting over 178 million people and causing 3.8 million deaths worldwide. According to the UN Secretary-General, the social and economic impact of the pandemic is enormous and growing, "no vaccine can undo the damage already done. The damage will stretch across the years and decades to come." [4]

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed further light on the value of empowering local actors, including women and youth, and leveraging their comparative advantages to ensure the 2030 Agenda is responsive to the needs of every segment of society. National governments must "build back better" with greater investment in social protection, health care, education, and decent jobs in collaboration with the private sector, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders. The promise of the 2030 Agenda can only be realized through SDG 17 (Partnership).

Objective

In response to UN Member States' call for the further empowerment local actors, the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers and the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) conducted a joint, inclusive online survey of the work and efforts of religious and traditional actors, including women and youth, in the five regions to accelerate the realization of the 2030 Agenda at the national[5] and local level.

Historically, religious and traditional actors have long played a vital role in conflict-affected societies and situations of transition given their unique connections based on mutual respect and trust with local communities and well-established mechanisms for conflict prevention, management, and resolution. The UN and many other IGOs have already been engaging numerous religious and traditional actors. While the collaboration between these actors has significantly increased in the last decade, existing partnerships could be made more inclusive and a broader degree of engagement could be undertaken.

In some contexts, religious and traditional actors enjoy the highest level of trust, and there is a formal structure recognizing their role. However, in many other contexts, their contributions are often not fully acknowledged, and their potential contribution remains underutilized. To this end, greater efforts should be made towards mobilizing the capacities and ingenuity of these actors, with inclusivity at the center of the approach. The UN system and its partners must shift from working in silos and adopt a more inclusive and interconnected systematic approach from the bottom-up and top-down, engaging both Track 1, 1.5, and Track 2, which is beyond the current traditional structure.

A key part of strengthening collaborations is ensuring that partnerships are not only mutually beneficial, but also meaningful in their given context. As such, it is important to build channels to better understand the efforts of these local actors and their needs to build more inclusive multi-stakeholder partnerships. Hence, the survey was designed to better understand the efforts of religious and traditional actors in relation to sustainable peace and development while also assessing the existing collaboration between the UN system and grassroots organizations and identifying challenges and recommendations. The key focus was to identify religious and traditional actors' needs and gather a snapshot of their situation in order to make recommendations on how the UN and other IGOs can better work with these key local civil society actors.

Outcomes

The survey was disseminated to 130 local society actors and organizations in the 5-regions with a 3-week deadline to submit their inputs. After the survey deadline, the responses were analyzed and collated under five overarching recommendations and shared with survey respondents in two working group sessions, in which participants offered their feedback to ensure each recommendation adequately reflected their expectations and aspirations for a holistic partnership between the UN and religious and traditional actors.

Sixty-four different religious and traditional actors, including women and youth and representatives of peacebuilding in academia, faith-based organizations, and other local civil society actors from around the globe responded to the survey. A key theme that emerged from the survey responses was that these actors have substantial knowledge and understanding of the 2030 Agenda and its universal principle of leaving no one behind. In some cases, respondents highlighted how they have implemented UN targets and indicators while also guided by various resolutions.

Overall, there appeared to be a positive perception of the UN and an alignment with its core values among survey respondents. In regard to UN engagement, several respondents highlighted projects in which they have collaborated with UN agencies, funds, or programs, in particular UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women, UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, and UN Population Fund (UNFPA), on various programs and projects related to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, social cohesion, and dialogue and mediation. However, there remain significant challenges and issues: the UN must move beyond ad hoc arrangements to some established guidelines for effective partnership and cooperation at the local level.

The average responses of the sixty-four survey respondents to questions regarding their current awareness and cooperation with the the 2030 Agenda are shown below.
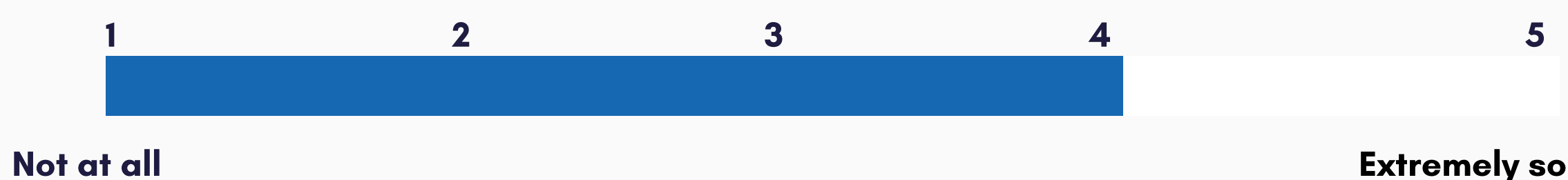
How familiar are you with the UN Sustainable Development Goals?

1	2	3	4	5

Not at all familiar   **Extremely familiar**

How relevant do you consider them to be to your work?

1	2	3	4	5

Not at all relevant   **Extremely relevant**

To what extent do you feel that the UN recognizes the work and appreciates the values of religious and traditional actors working to advance the SDGs?

1	2	3	4	5

Not at all   **Extremely so**

Based on your context and experience, how would you describe the current partnership between the UN and religious and traditional peacemakers, including women and youth, in relation to peacebuilding and sustaining peace?

1	2	3	4	5

Insufficient   **Excellent**

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Recommendations

The survey generated both normative and operational data for fostering engagement between the religious and traditional actors and the UN system and international organizations. The following five overarching recommendations were emerging themes for effective peacebuilding and sustainable development at the local level. A series of more specific recommendations are clustered under each thematic recommendation.

Employ comprehensive, people-centered, and context-specific analysis

In many contexts, religious and traditional actors have complex roles and work in settings that are often volatile and dangerous. Their relationship with their constituents evolves constantly, which could have either positive or negative implications for partnerships with the UN or others. Prior to any engagement or activity, the UN should employ a context-specific analysis and assessment of peacebuilding actors and their efforts to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the demographic makeup, including religious/cultural practices and different ethnic and minority groups. The UN system could conduct a baseline study, with inclusivity at its core, on the role of religious and traditional actors and institutions in the local contexts.

During such activities it is important to: 1) avoid broad generalizations and ensure that all actors are represented and respected; 2) identify existing mechanisms and agreements on peacebuilding and conflict resolution to avoid duplication; 3) and understand social and political limits. To this end, creating a database of recommendations and records of their status, which de facto also establishes local trust. It is important to note that baseline studies must include all UN entities, both at Headquarter (HQ) and Country Offices (Cos), as well as various regional partners and stakeholders. Although this may be time-consuming and, in some cases, a safety concern, national organizations and existing networks could assist in the activities.
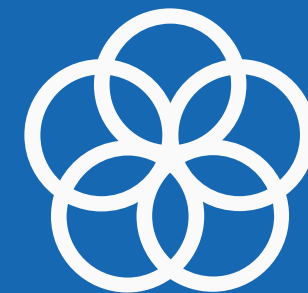
Ensure safety and protection with conflict-sensitive and /risk-informed approaches

During the COVID-19 pandemic, religious and traditional actors and institutions, including women and youth, have mobilized rapidly to reduce the spread of contagion and its impact. They have engaged with government authorities at various levels to help advise policies and mainstream messaging to protect human rights and health. At the same time, the crackdown by states and non-state actors on civil society organizations and actors has increased, limiting civic space for engagement. These recent events have resulted in the erosion of democratic principles, social cohesion, and economic prosperity, all of which impedes the advancement of the 2030 Agenda. Additionally, certain groups, such as women and youth, indigenous people, those with disabilities, and people discriminated against based on their race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, have been more vulnerable to the effects of the events.

To optimize the important work of local actors, the UN and its international, regional, and national partners must ensure that principles of "Do No Harm," gender sensitivity, culture of peace, respect for women and children are integrated, from inception to implementation, in all policies and frameworks, both at HQ and COs. While providing space for religious and traditional actors to engage in various UN platforms and policies is essential to peacebuilding and sustainable development, the UN must also discuss the expected roles and outcomes of multiple programs and projects. It is important to recognize possible risks that may arise from every respective community engagement. For example, it is essential to move beyond the traditional "top-down approach" where policies are developed at the international and national level and implemented at the local level. Such approaches are often seen as a continuation of Western "colonialism", where donor governments extend their interference in local politics and economies through controlling the development agenda and promoting their national interests.

The UN system and international and national governments must ensure their protection and security and avoid "instrumentalizing" them in the process through a people-centered and bottom-up approach, where policies and frameworks are developed and led at the subnational and community level. Building from ground-up offers new and innovative solutions, which not only creates ownership and trust in the communities, but also accelerates the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

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Implement community-based capacity building and flexible financing

Despite the critical role that diverse religious and traditional actors and groups play in advancing sustainable peace and development in conflict-affected and fragile states, their efforts continue to lack adequate support and recognition. Local religious and traditional actors often lack the experience and capacity to meet the requirements for UN or other international funding proposals. These challenges are often compounded for women and youth of faith whose critical role in crisis response and peacebuilding is often overlooked and impeded by gender- and age- discrimination. Additional support for women and youth of faith is needed to foster a safe and enabling environment for their meaningful participation.

Therefore, the UN system and its partners must provide regular, direct, and flexible funding accessible to grassroots organizations, initiatives, and movements across the humanitarian-development-peace and security nexus. In addition to dedicating funding instruments and technical capacity building, such as training and learning exchange opportunities at the local level, there is also a need for UN staff to increase their capacity for engaging diverse local actors and groups. For example, the UN could rely on existing regional and global networks, which have established partnerships with local actors to support the process. At the same time, it is important for the UN to ensure local ownership, meaning that all meetings, trainings, and gatherings, whether at the national or community level, are community-led/informed.

> " Local actors do not have the name recognition that national and international organizations possess.... actors should not be bypassed and must been seen as partners in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. However, the process of engagement with the UN is overwhelming and it should make criteria for accessing UN grant by local actors simple with fewer evidence of active activities at the grass root. "

Ensure an inclusive, rights-based approach and meaningful engagement and participation of women and youth and other minority groups

One of the central pledges of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs is the principle of leaving no one behind: eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and humanity as a whole. Unfortunately, the recent pandemic has further exacerbated the already present disparities across regions and within countries. The UN system and its partners must adopt a robust and transformative, multi-stakeholder and holistic approach based on disaggregated data and evidence-based policymaking to identify the circumstances of those left behind and ensure their engagement and participation in the developments of targeted policies and frameworks.

Religious and traditional actors and other informal structures will be a key partner for the UN to achieve the 2030 Agenda and promote sustainable development. However, while these traditional authorities and mechanisms may be perceived by local communities to be more legitimate than state institutions, they are not always may not be inclusive or fully participatory. UN partnership and engagement must ensure inclusive approaches that integrate the perspectives and needs of various constituencies (urban and rural), in particular of women and youth, in devising local political, social, and economic solutions. This allows for broader engagement of sections of society to create more buy-in for peace and thus builds a complete picture of the breadth and scope of conflict's impacts and potential resolutions. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Women, Peace, and Security resolution 1325, and the Youth, Peace, and Security twin resolutions 2250 and 2235 must be at the core of engagement. The UN must ensure gender-sensitive, less technical application process, and long-term flexible funding to further enhance and sustain women and youth participation and engagement in peacebuilding and development efforts.
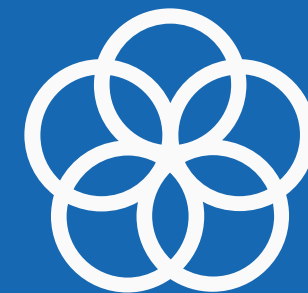
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> " The United Nations Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund's (PBF) Gender and Youth Promotion Initiative (GYPI) are powerful initiatives to show commitment and support women and youth in peace building efforts. The success of the great programs has cleared partly for the greater roles women and youth can play in decision making process... however, additional programs and mechanisms are needed. "

Establish further mechanisms for collaboration and coordination

The above normative and procedural recommendations will only be fully realized if they are complemented by a holistic partnership built on two-way coordination and information sharing between and within the UN system and civil society actors. UN HLPF discussions have at times identified resource constraints and coordination with local actors as the biggest challenges to strengthening collaboration and aligning agendas and strategies.

Religious and traditional actors and institutions have substantial knowledge and information of their local communities and hence are able to provide critical data and entry points to the UN system on peacebuilding and sustainable development, with the expectation that it will be received and used where appropriate. However, these local actors have at times expressed frustration with the lack of "mechanisms" that encourage collaboration and coordination. The UN could manage this through establishing and identifying a clear point of contact within every one of its various agencies, funds, and programmes who could systematically engage and enhance partnership with local actors. Sustainable development engagement must move from "short-term solutions" towards "long-term" inclusive and transformative actions. Moreover, the UN could loosen the requirements for "consultative status" which would de facto increase collaboration and civic space for engagement.

Beyond implementing internal mechanism, the UN must also contextualize the language of its framework and policies in relation to the 2030 Agenda in order for local actors to easily digest and comprehend the intended outcomes, which not only creates a sense of trust and interconnectedness but also increases sustainable results.

During the process, it will also be critical for national governments to show their support and willingness to create space for engagement and dialogue with all segments of their respective society to advance sustainable development. UN engagement with various actors and groups depends on national governments political will for advancing localized approaches.

> " While there has been some recognition of the importance of engaging with faith leaders and Faith-Based Organizations by the UN - there is still some way to go in terms of long term sustained and meaningful engagement. "