

PRESENTATION AT THE UNITED NATIONS “INTERFAITH HARMONY WEEK: MULTI-RELIGIOUS PARTNERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT” – AZZA KARAM¹

TRUSTEESHIP COUNCIL,

FEBRUARY 6, 2015

Your Excellency Mr. Sam Kutesa, President of the General Assembly,
Your Excellency Madame Ambassador Ms. Irene Natividad,
Distinguished Delegates and Participants from Member States and Civil Society,

I am grateful and honored to be among you here today on this important occasion of the World Interfaith Harmony Week.

I wish to thank in particular, the Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations for inviting me.

Ten years ago, I served as the President of the Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations myself. I remember how difficult it was to contact offices at the United Nations, to request an audience with colleagues who were working in similar fields, or to seek wisdom about shared concerns regarding projects or programmes, let alone to seek partnership towards joint objectives. It was difficult to receive a response. Today, and a decade after I joined the United Nations, we are all gathered under the auspices of the Trusteeship Council, because the United Nations has strongly acknowledged the role of religious communities in international development and humanitarian endeavors.

Today I can share with you significant work done within the United Nations itself, which I have been privileged to be involved in, and which has produced, among many other joint endeavors and even some paradigm shifts, a *mechanism* within the UN, which is the Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging with Faith Based organizations for Sustainable Development (IATF-FBOs).

The Task Force is a critical space within the UN which convenes over 15 different offices and agencies, many of whom are members of the UN Development Group (UNDG). We connect, we exchange knowledge and experiences, and we inform and enlighten each other as to the why, what, where and how of the outreach we each undertake, with diverse actors in the world of religion.

We are learning - among many valuable lessons that we have yet much to be informed about - that a degree of humility as to the role of the United Nations vis-à-vis the much larger world of faiths and religions, is wise.

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The Inter-Agency Task Force hosted a seminal consultation in May 2014, which brought together diverse UN development agencies, with international faith-based development organizations (FBOs), and bilateral development donors. The Consultation discussed the role of religion as it intersects with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) currently under consideration by governments to succeed the MDGs. The title of the Consultation was “Religion and Development Post 2015”.

I will take the few minutes I have with you here today to share a few of the rich findings and discussions of this consultation, bearing in mind that there is a full report which you can access for much more accurate detail -- <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/DONOR-UN-FBO%20May%202014.pdf>

This was a dialogue between the UN, the FBOs and the Donors, which, if you will bear with me, I will speak to in the first person and paraphrase, on behalf of each side. Just to simplify and engage you in what could otherwise be a long and complex discussion. But I reiterate that I will be simplifying, and paraphrasing, in my own words.

From the UN and Donors, side, here is some of what they said to the FBO partners:

The role of the role of religious actors in development processes is not contested. Rather, the question is whom and how [do we] engage religious communities, towards shared and sustainable human development goals.

There remains an ongoing need for shared analytical clarity when dealing with religion in development processes – we seek human rights and dignity. Not one or the other.

We need to see, and to hear, not only condemnation by some religious leaders of extremism and violence, but we need to see concerted engagement and activism amongst religious communities which renders extremism and violence unnecessary. If we are at fault for not seeing and not hearing enough, then help us to see and to hear better: where is the faith-inspired and faith-based mobilization against violence?

Yes, we understand – and will seek to - reach out to engage better, more systematically and respectfully, and on a range of development, humanitarian and peace and security issues, but our litmus test of the commitment of religious actors towards human rights, in this century, has to include your positions, your discourse and your engagements, on gender equality.

Here is what some of what the FBOs shared with the UN and bilateral Donors:

When you reach out to the world of religion, do not seek to engage only religious leaders, for while they are important actors, they are but one aspect of a multi-layered reality of religious existence. Also seek out faith-based service delivery organizations, community based religious actors, and appreciate the plurality of religious voices and means of engagement.

We understand, and we realize, that you continue to demand evidence of our impact, evidence of the 'special value-added' we bring in engaging on and with development. And we are prepared to work with you to document this evidence. But know that our impact cannot be quantified nor measured in indicators developed without our own participation or input. And be prepared for the fact that our 'evidence' may well overwhelm you.

Indeed we appreciate that human rights are important. For us, human rights are a means towards an end of human dignity.

Now that you see us, we welcome your partnership on a level playing field, as we stand shoulder to shoulder with your leaders and institutions. Work in partnership with us, but seek not to use us or instrumentalize us, to tick a box or satisfy a fashion, or merely to legitimize or add credibility to an endeavor.

All agreed that in-depth dialogue is important in engaging with faith leaders and FBOs. But any collaboration should be based on genuine negotiations, mutual holistic understanding, and a transparency of positioning.

And these are but the milestones of an important journey towards the destination of sustainable human development and peace and security now and beyond 2015.

Ends.

New York.