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What next for interfaith partnerships and human development?

Katherine Marshall

Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, World Faiths Development Dialogue

Let me begin with a story, in the form of a parable.

One of the more improbable collaborations I know about unfolded some years ago in Accra. A group of Muslim, Christian, and traditional religious leaders came together several times to build an interreligious partnership with the Ghanaian government and the World Bank. Their focus was garbage and sanitation. They crafted positive messages that resonated with the different faiths, centered on cleanliness and godliness. They framed a pristine city as a religious struggle and goal. They used media creatively to energize people, young and old. Moral arguments were combined with a practical bent: Ghanaian pride in the face of an upcoming international sporting event. Volunteers were mobilized. Schoolchildren did cleanup campaigns. Stagnant pools were filled in. Health and sanitation were linked, in minds and in practice.

There were, it must be admitted, some fleeting dreams of a material, lucrative partnership. These did not materialize, as the logic of faith leaders and communities running sanitation services was flawed. However, down the line, when tensions flared in an election season, the religious leaders who had thrashed out practical details around garbage knew and trusted each other and they came together to tamp down tensions. And, several years later, I saw the same faces at an interfaith meeting where the topic was action on climate change. The group had a foundation of trust and knowledge to build on.

Another example of improbable collaboration was a meeting in Manila last August organized by the Department of Foreign Affairs and UNDP. The idea was to learn from emergency faith responses to natural catastrophes (particularly Typhoon Haiyan) by faith-inspired groups. The variety and effectiveness of the mobilization was quite remarkable and a sequel is likely to be a Southeast Asian exploration of potential partnerships.

The interfaith movement is a rich mosaic of efforts, ranging from theological discourse to practical coalitions. Some interreligious harmony work is built on ethereal, ethical, and theological foundations. And some is grounded in an earthy, urgent common interest or in response to a crisis or threat.

The Ghana sanitation alliance shows the potential power of partnerships and alliances that build on community mobilization and on a shared commitment to the common good. It also illustrates some of the complexities in interreligious efforts: they may begin in one place, move along unexpected paths, and encounter some obstacles. Measuring results is hard. But they are an essential part of both moral and practical narratives, the common

sense of human dignity in its abstract and practical senses, that underlies so fundamentally the global human development goals that we, together, seek to advance.

As we look ahead, I see five imperatives in the effort to build on the foundation of common interest, moral authority, and deep caring for justice, equality, and human welfare that are the core purpose of interfaith work.

1. *First, coalitions, alliances and partnerships must build on solid knowledge and understanding.* This means knowledge about other faiths and communities. It calls for a far greater, intelligent appreciation among development partners about religious institutions, communities, and practices. And it calls also for a development literacy among faith inspired institutions. What do we know about fighting poverty in the twenty first century? What do we really not understand or see differently? What does religion have to do with it, and how does that translate into action?
2. *There is much experience of interreligious action. But it is poorly documented, little evaluated, and far too little known and appreciated.* We need good ways to capture, share, and learn from experience
3. *There is much talk, a lot of eulogizing, but also considerable grumbling about partnerships.* We know they are needed to make anything happen in our multifaceted and multidisciplinary world. But how? The MDGs sought to use the disciplines of business – measurement, deadlines, accountability, and calls for public private partnerships. But they did not offer much real guidance for the complex cross-cutting partnerships that complex goals demand. The SDGs could also use more inspiration to help translate broad goals into action that citizens can understand. Above all they demand a real focus on what makes partnerships tick, well and sustainably. This is a topic that deserves serious application, to define what works, recognize what drives people crazy, and find ways to balance the very different assets that partners bring.
4. *We need to build on areas where there are common understandings of what is right and urgent.* Child and maternal survival and welfare are good examples but even there quantitative goals can seem abstract and rather removed from reality. Broad goals need to be translated into practical action. That can mean concrete programs in an urban neighborhood or village. It also means policy action: having the right people at the right tables where ideas and programs are shaped. And it means ensuring that faith partners are part of the important aid harmonization agenda.
5. *And fifth, we need the will and the space to acknowledge and address areas where there are differences, differences in understanding, possible differences in values, and different priorities.* Some contentious topics are obvious: reproductive health stands out. Others are less acknowledged. There are large differences in understandings of what poverty means and why it persists, on whether progress is being made, on the roles of minorities and pluralism, on how spiritual and material welfare are linked, on the causes and consequences of inequality, and on the challenges facing women in modernizing societies.

The philosopher Jacques Maritain famously commented in the 1940s that we could all agree on human rights as long as we did not dig too deeply into the justifications and potentially different interpretations. If we are to succeed in the noble and achievable dream of ending poverty and assuring all people a true chance to achieve their potential, we need to recognize that there are different paths and different perspectives. But we also need to work harder to find and build on the common ground and values that unites\ us and to acknowledge and address differences in a civilized manner. We need to develop the instruments of partnership that can make interreligious harmony, interreligious goals, and interreligious partnerships a central feature of the SDG framework and above all its translation into reality.

Thank you.