



*The Committee of Religious
NGOs at the United Nations*

Interfaith Harmony Week: Multi-Religious Partnership for Sustainable Development

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Your Excellency Mr. Sam Kahamba Kutesa, President of the United Nations
General Assembly

Your Excellency Ms. Cristina Gallach, Under Secretary General of the United
Nations

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Partners all:

On behalf of the Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations, allow me to
note how fitting it is that we commemorate World Interfaith Harmony Week by
focusing on sustainable development.

Too many know too well the crushing weight of poverty, how it stunts, humiliates
and plunders. Too many know too well the scandal of exclusion, how it rejects,
thwarts and chokes.

It is our collective moral obligation to give all persons the chance to both better
develop themselves and to better contribute to our shared well-being.

Meeting this challenge will be hard. It will take more development and we are
already pushing against the physical limits of our planet. But, it must be done.

I. The Roles of Religions

What then are the roles of religions? Let me mention three.

A. Agents of Health Care and Education

First, there are the pioneering services the religious communities continue to offer in advancing health and education around the world. In place after place, the clinics and schools are built and run by religious communities. These ongoing efforts remain vast and vitally important and they need to be more engaged in multi-stakeholder partnerships.

B. Agents of Advancing Holistic Development

Second, religious communities provide a moral foundation for a genuinely holistic notion of sustainable development. Importantly, they also help generate vital forms of “human and social capital” essential to sustainable development.

For religions, the moral foundation for sustainable development has two deep and inseparable roots: persons and communities.

Each person is “religiously obliged”—so to speak—to develop himself or herself on all levels: physical, intellectual, moral, affective, aesthetic and—yes, for religious people—on the religious level as well. No one is excluded from this inner summons for development: not women, not children, not people of different religions, classes, races or viewpoints. In religious terms, all are called to the “holy” task of developing themselves. And religions don’t just assert this. They foster the development of personal virtues like honesty, the love of learning and a commitment to the dignity of work. If we delve deeper, we will understand that these personal virtues are essential to building up what economists call the “human capital” needed for sustainable development.

But—and this is vitally important—religious communities know that persons and communities are inseparable. This means that true sustainable development must engage both persons and their communities. We ignore this profound reciprocity at our peril. To nourish and strengthen vital communities, religions advance social virtues like trust, seeking the common good and an abiding sense

of responsibility for others animated by unrestricted Love and Compassion. Again, these social virtues help generate what economists have begun to call the “social capital” essential for development.

My point here is that the religions understand that the flourishing of the person and the vibrancy of the community go together. They inculcate personal and social virtues that generate human and social capital that contribute to the bedrock of sustainable development.

C. Values Essential For Global Markets

Third, let me raise a thesis that is highly provocative in some circles, namely that the engines of our global markets need to be bounded by the fundamental values that are widely shared by the religious communities. This is important, because our markets have to be major drivers of sustainable development.

The moral argument for this thesis is, I believe, simple enough: the market is a human mechanism; it is not an end in itself; it is to serve us in our sustainable development. Therefore it needs to be within an envelope of values that support sustainable development.

Now let me draw our attention to the gathering fresh intellectual currents among international bankers and economists that in a remarkable way are supporting in pragmatic terms the simple moral argument I have just shared.

These fresh currents are in reaction to the alarming trends toward greater and greater economic imbalances crossing virtually all states. By next year, the 80 richest people will control the wealth equivalent to the bottom 2.5 billion persons. Also by next year, the top 1% will control half of global wealth.

Very importantly—but not so widely known yet—is the fact that last year in London, in a remarkable meeting of international investors controlling about a third of global assets, Mark Carney, the governor of the Bank of England, captured the emerging consensus by warning in his opening speech: “Just as any revolution eats its children, unchecked market fundamentalism can devour the social capital essential for the long-term dynamism of capitalism itself.” In that

same gathering, Christine Laguarde, the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, quoted Pope Francis' characterization of increasing inequality as "the root of social evil." She noted that "opportunity" could never be equal in a deeply unequal society. She acknowledged that the market alone is not equipped to handle this challenge.

This is a sea change. And, as economic advisor and writer Chrystia Freeland has noted, as the intellectual tide turns, the political tide may also follow. So now is the time for religious believers to also become advocates for their own values as they can be applied to our markets, so that the markets can become even better drivers of sustainable development.

I have just touched on three ways that religious communities can contribute to sustainable development. Happily, the world's religious communities are collaborating more and more in offering these kinds of contributions. This is interfaith harmony that makes a difference!

In conclusion, morally, we must unite to end extreme poverty and include every person in development that is sustainable because it is in harmony with our earth.

Your Excellency the President of the General Assembly, Your Excellency the Under Secretary General, Your Excellencies representing member states, we all depend upon your political leadership during this critical year. You can, I am sure, depend on the great streams of moral commitment that run like a river through the religious communities.

Thank you.