BUILIDING & EQUIPPING INTERRELIGIOUS COUNCILS (IRCs) FOR ACTION:

A Strategic Vision for Religions for Peace

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PREFACE

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Interreligious Councils (IRCs) are providing life-saving messages, supporting the most vulnerable, countering stigma and discrimination, and offering spiritual and emotional care and support for children, the elderly, refugees and those experiencing disruption and distress.

This paper will provide the background of *Religions for Peace* (*RfP*)'s IRC development process, discern key organizing principles of IRCs through historic and current examples, and outline a process of strengthening capacities and overall performance of these multi-religious assets.

INTRODUCTION

The core strength of *RfP* is its "representative" approach to multi-religious cooperation. *RfP* understands that its network is to be built and led by the representatives of the religious communities themselves. Consistent with this approach, *RfP* strives to ensure that the religious communities – through their leaders, outstanding persons, grassroots congregations and other organizational manifestations – serve as the main agents of multi-religious cooperation.

This strength is harnessed through *RfP*'s commitment to working with and through existing religious structures and institutions. It positions *RfP* to engage religious communities from religious leaders to the grassroots, and to mobilize local congregations, women's and youth groups to deliver critically needed services and potentially engage very large numbers of religious believers in advocacy and action.

It is critical for multi-religious cooperation to contribute to prevention or termination of conflicts, in addition to other developmental and human rights challenges that can – directly or indirectly – involve different religious communities. Pragmatic strength resides in cooperation that enables diverse religious communities to align around common challenges to peace, offers them creative ways to take advantage of their complementary strengths, provides them with efficient modes for equipping themselves for action and – importantly – positions them for partnerships with secular institutions, without engaging those institutions in advancing particular sectarian beliefs.

RfP's regional and national IRCs, including their women of faith and youth networks, are the mechanisms and engines of the *RfP*'s global movement. The *RfP* movement consists of its World Council; regional and national IRCs, which encompass women and youth networks on these respective levels and their religious constituencies; the Global Women of Faith Network; and Global Interfaith Youth Network.

IRCs are independent entities and also part of the global *RfP* movement through affiliation. Led by the representatives of diverse religious communities, IRCs are designed to provide a platform for cooperative action throughout the different levels within these religious communities, from grassroots to the senior-most leaders. Successful IRCs serve as bridges between diverse religious communities that can help build trust, reduce hostility in areas of conflict and provide a platform for common action.

I. IRC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

In 2000, the *RfP* International Secretariat established the IRC Development Program with the support of one of its founding partners, Rissho Kosei-kai. Following *RfP*'s historic building of the IRC Bosnia and Herzegovina and the IRC Sierra Leone in 1997, the IRC Development Program aimed at "facilitating the building of new IRCs" based upon the principle of representativity and "strengthening governance and program operational capabilities of existing IRCs."

New regional offices were established in Africa (2002) and Latin America (2003), and a regional leadership structure, European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL), was formed in 2002. Through

these regional offices and their IRC Development Officers, *RfP* International and regional bodies collaborated in building new national IRCs and strengthening their organizational and program capacities. The number of IRCs evolved from 33 in 1999 to 90 in 2019.

Balancing the locally led, largely self-sufficient and voluntary nature of many of IRCs with the need to forge a movement-wide shared identity, reciprocity and competency in the areas of governance, program, finance and other key organizational matters has been a critical issue and a constant challenge for the strengthening of the *RfP* global movement. Honoring IRCs' autonomy and independence, *RfP* International has entered into an affiliation agreement with National IRCs (*see Section VII: Roles and Responsibilities of Different Levels of IRCs on page 12*), provided technical assistance and accompaniment by *RfP* International and Regional IRC Development Officers, and facilitated sharing of best practices and lessons learned among IRCs.

While the majority of IRCs operate through voluntary services provided by member religious communities themselves and with a minimum level of paid staff, there have constantly been 10-15 highly operational IRCs with sizable staffing, multiple programs with multiple donors and partners in the last decade. As an illustration of *RfP* IRC Development process, *RfP* International listened to the voices of religious communities in Uganda and facilitated the building of the Interreligious Council of Uganda (IRCU) in 2002. Through the coordinated assistance and accompaniment by *RfP* International and Africa, a few years later, IRCU evolved into the country's most trusted interreligious body with an annual budget of approximately USD 50 million and nearly 60 staff members, engaging in multiple projects including care and support for children affected by HIV/AIDS and conflict transformation in northern Uganda.

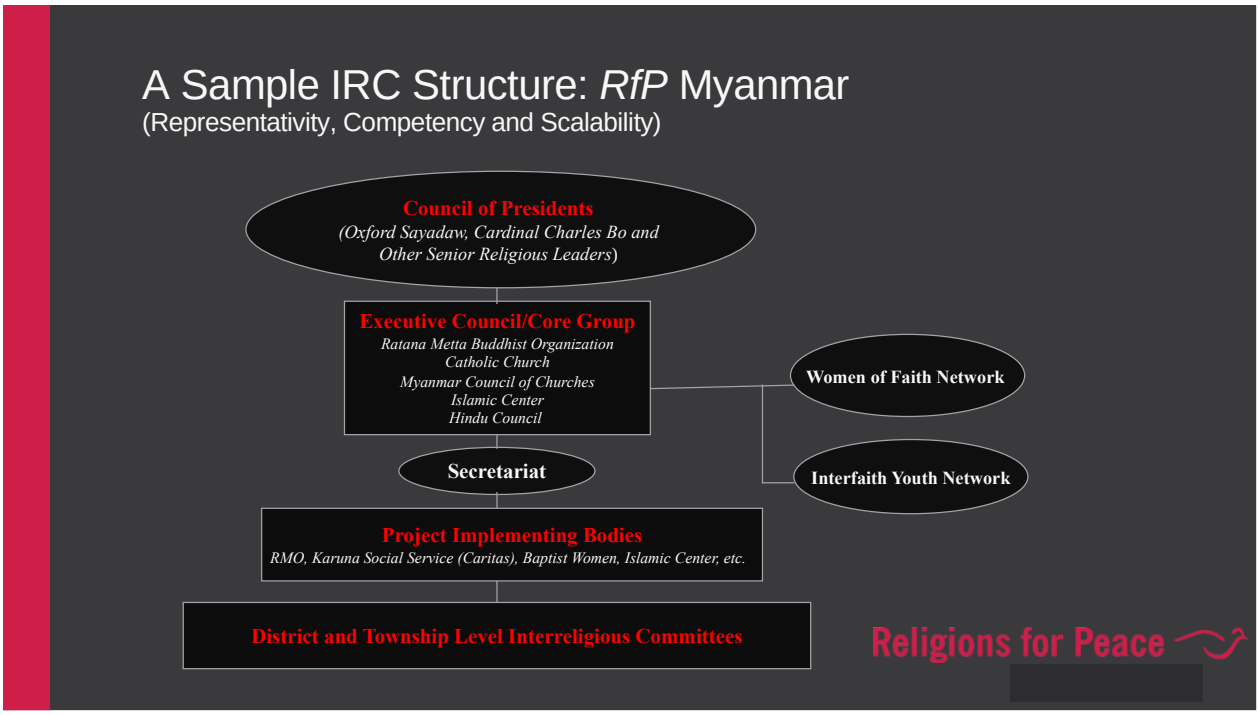
II. SAMPLE STRUCTURES & EXAMPLES OF IRCS: *Representativity, Competency and Scalability*

Once IRCs are built on the principles of representativity (*see a sample IRC structure on page 5*) and trusting relationships among diverse religious communities are cultivated through common actions, IRCs become sustainable multi-religious civil society mechanisms capable of addressing multiple issues in times of conflict, peace and humanitarian emergencies. The following are a few illustrative examples of IRC's work in Asia, Africa and Latin America:

MYANMAR

Built upon its historic work in Myanmar, *RfP* facilitated the building of the country's first representative interreligious body in 2012. The IRC in Myanmar (*RfP* Myanmar) was co-led by the Ratana Metta Buddhist Organization, the Catholic Church, the Myanmar Council of Churches, the Islamic Center and the Hindu Council. *RfP* Myanmar has advanced interfaith dialogue and action at national and local levels, built township and provincial level interreligious committees, including women of faith and interfaith youth networks at those levels, and launched the high-level multi-stakeholder Advisory Forum for Peace and Reconciliation among the government, the military and all ethnic groups. The trust cultivated through these processes and common actions by senior religious leaders, women of faith and interfaith youth networks has helped forge multi-religious action to provide life-saving messages and care and support for the vulnerable communities in conflict areas in the time of COVID-19.

Below is a sample structure of an IRC drawn from the case of Myanmar, which consists of heads of the country's major religious communities and institutions, mid-level management, project implementing bodies from diverse religious traditions, women of faith and interfaith youth networks, as well as a functioning Secretariat. The IRC structure is built on the principles of representativity, competency and scalability.



SIERRA LEONE

IRC Sierra Leone mediated a series of peace negotiations between the government and the rebel forces during the civil war. Its Christian and Muslim women of faith leaders secured the release of over 50 child hostages from the rebel forces. IRC Sierra Leone provided care and support for children and other vulnerable populations affected by HIV/AIDs and Ebola.

Built upon its track record in multi-religious advocacy and action, IRC Sierra Leone is currently responding to COVID-19, running Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation television talk shows by senior religious leaders and regular radio broadcasts on the adaptation of religious practices for the health and safety of believers and the general public. IRC Sierra Leone recently facilitated a training for its district coordinators in cooperation with WHO and the Ministry of Health. Trainees have retrained 36 peer groups in all 16 districts of the country and now reach every village in their respective chiefdoms with messages of safe practices and solidarity.

PERU

IRC Peru was co-built by diverse religious communities in 2009. IRC Peru has been recognized by religious institutions, civil society organizations and the highest level of the government as the most representative interreligious platform in the country. IRC Peru has engaged in interreligious advocacy and action in the fight against corruption; care for the environment with special emphasis on ending

deforestation in the Amazon; welcoming and integrating refugees and migrants; and eliminating violence against women and children.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, IRC Peru is working to provide approximately 8,000 vulnerable asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants (2,000 families) with essential emergency response materials including food, hygiene kits, and rent vouchers.

III. IRC DEVELOPMENT and *RfP*'s STRATEGIC PLAN 2020-2025

The *RfP* global movement -- including national and regional IRCs, women of faith and youth networks -- co-developed and launched its 2020-25 Strategic Plan, identifying and committing to six strategic goals to advance multi-religious collaborative action for peace: 1) Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies; 2) Gender Equality; 3) Environment; 4) Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion; 5) Interreligious Education; and 6) Global Partnerships.

This plan, approved and adopted by the *RfP* World Council, is the culmination of sustained multi-religious and multi-stakeholder debate and consensus-building for over a year. Its framework and action points were adopted by over 1,000 religious representatives from over 125 countries at the *RfP* 10th World Assembly in Lindau, Germany in August 2019. The plan was further delineated during the Multi-religious and Multi-stakeholder Partnership for Peace and Development in New York in December 2019 by 250 representative religious and spiritual leaders who were joined by government officials, diplomats, United Nations representatives, leaders of partner organizations and philanthropists.

The Strategic Plan recognizes IRCs as mechanisms for its implementation and operationalization. The methods of operationalization include: 1) advocacy, 2) knowledge management, 3) capacity building, and 4) humanitarian support (*see page 12 of the Strategic Plan*). The Strategic Plan also stresses multi-stakeholder partnerships, linking IRCs with context-specific partners such as UN agencies and faith-based organizations (FBOs).

For IRCs to effectively implement multi-religious actions in six strategic goals, they need systematic training and technical assistance to build the organizational and program capacities of IRCs and their women of faith and interfaith youth networks.

This paper provides an overview of how a diverse array of relevant resources could be developed and shared with IRCs, as part of a package of global, regional and national skill-building efforts.

IV. IRC DEVELOPMENT STAGES & NEEDED CAPACITY BUILDING

IRC organizational capacity varies from country to country. The matrix of IRC Development Stages on page 8 identifies key areas of IRC organizational development stages and corresponding capacity building needs.

Four stages of IRC development are based upon the assessment of IRCs' expected levels of competence in the following areas: 1) governance, 2) gender mainstreaming, 3) management and administration, 4) program operations, 5) institutional sustainability, and 6) global affiliation and networking.

Stage four of the IRC development matrix describes the desired outcome of, and the strategic approach to, IRC development. The following key characteristics and features are recognized as the model/criteria for a successful IRC:

- The IRC is a representative, legally registered, fully functioning and financially sustainable mechanism with a diversified resource base and established partnerships.
- Religious communities are represented and vested in the IRC governance structures and accountable to members through regular review and oversight.
- Women of faith are in decision-making roles and program strategy has integrated a gender perspective. Representatives of the Women of Faith Network are part of the governance structures.
- Representatives of the Interfaith Youth Network are part of the governance structures and the voices of youth are integrated into governance and program strategies.
- Accountable personnel and financial management systems are in place and regularly audited.
- IRCs have strong local ownership in program planning, implementation and monitoring.
- Institutional partnerships, including multiple funders (such as the government, other civil society NGOs, academia, private sector) are established. In other words, IRCs are seen as *partners of choice* for work on sustainable development, human rights, and peace and security.

It is important to note that diverse national contexts require *contextualization, flexibility* and *adaptation,* and that the development of an IRC is not as *linear* as implied in the IRC Development matrix and its model/criteria for success outlined above.

In some national contexts, an IRC focuses more on supporting, strengthening and engaging in each member faith community's activities, and on the mission to build bridges and trust between religious communities. Such an IRC may reach *maturity* with competence and capacity in just a few of the areas such as gender mainstreaming and coordinated advocacy, rather than its full-fledged program competencies.

IRC Organizational Stages

		Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
		IRC at early stage of development: establishing its structure, creating basic program priorities	IRC has basic capacity: legally registered, basic governing and staff structures, some program activities	IRC builds record of achievement: establishing partnerships and stronger organizational systems, with work publicly recognized	IRC is fully functioning and sustainable: diversified resource base and established partnerships, leadership role in RfP network
BUILD	Governance	› Two or more religions committed to collaborating based upon shared values › Working committee established and functional	› Inclusive IRC membership with increasing number of communities involved › Legal registration with initial government bodies and other related structures in place	› Minority and majority religions represented in governance structures › Representativity by role and competence in external relations, taskforce and boards › Governing board active in policy making and planning	› Religious communities fully vested in governance structures with engagement at national and local levels. › Board is accountable to members through regular review and oversight › Fully functioning mechanism for leadership and board renewal in place
BUILD	Gender Mainstreaming	› Female religious leadership identified and participating in IRC formation › Religious leaders encouraged to promote role of religious women	› Women's desk/structure established to mobilize Religious women's groups › Special projects targeting women's needs undertaken	› Network of religious women's organizations in place › Religious women's work mainstreamed in program planning	› Critical mass of female leaders in decision making roles › Program strategy has strong gender perspective and engages wide range of local women's groups and initiatives
BUILD	Management & Administration	› Volunteer committees › Utilize administrative and financial systems of member communities/individuals	› Limited staff in place › Bank account and basic financial system in place	› Full time executive and program staff › Auditable financial systems › Basic administrative /personnel systems in place	› Full complement of competent staff with strong personnel systems/oversight › Financial management system able to handle multiple funding sources
EQUIP	Program Operations	› Undertake local inter-religious events › Conduct basic advocacy actions (statements, letters, etc.)	› Ability to mobilize religious communities in program activities › Technically competent program committee(s) established › Coordinated advocacy by leaders	› Coordination and mobilization of religious communities at multiple levels › Program and information management system in place › Partnerships established with RfP and others	› Strong local ownership in program planning and delivery › Full program planning, implementation and monitoring capacity › Ongoing advocacy engagement using multiple media
EQUIP	Institutional Sustainability	› Reliant on contributed services and resources › Participate in civil society (CS) networks/coalitions	› Operational support from 1-2 external sources › Ability to mobilize some funds from local member communities	› External support from 2-3 key partners › Strong buy-in from member religious institutions › Developing plan for continuity and sustainability	› Sustainable funding base with competent staff › Institutional partnerships with key funders (e.g. UN, governments, NGOs)
NETWORK	Global Affiliation & Networking	› Emerging IRC in contact with RfP Global Network › Initiate relationship building with civil society, government and other organizations	› Periodic participation in RfP regional and international structures/activities › Ad hoc communication to internal and external constituencies › Advocacy and facilitate multi-religious perspective	› Consistent collaboration with RfP and other partners at national, regional and global levels › Functioning communications capacity to reach all key constituencies on regular basis	› Providing leadership and models for RfP network at regional and global levels, including World Assembly › Seen as "partners of choice" for civil society, government, and other key actors

V. CHALLENGES TO INTERRELIGIOUS COLLABORATION AND THE NEED FOR CONTEXTUALIZED APPROACHES TO IRC BUILDING

While *RfP* has established its own distinct model and approaches to IRC building, the increase of religious and interreligious actors on the ground and resulting *complexities and competitions* for needed spaces and resources have posed various challenges to IRC development.

In the past two decades, interfaith initiatives and organizations have emerged and increased at local, national, regional and international levels. Religious communities, their leaders and members have been engaged in multiple activities led by multiple organizations with the support of multiple donors and partners. While such flourishing of interfaith efforts strengthens the overall interfaith movement, an increased level of *competitiveness* in pursuit of needed spaces and resources and lack of coordination have been observed and experienced by religious and interreligious actors and their partners. Some donors and UN agencies have also begun to develop their own versions of "Interreligious Councils" to advance their specific mandate and mission, which add to the existing *complexities and competition.*

In the spirit of *openness and inclusion* recognized in Goal 6 of its Strategic Plan, *RfP* respects, honors, and wherever possible, works with, diverse organizations and their interfaith initiatives. At the same time, honoring differences and distinctiveness in the mission and approaches of diverse organizations also calls on *RfP* to remain faithful and committed to its own principles, model and approaches to IRC building. Based upon the contextualized analysis of local religious and interreligious actors and their relations on the ground, *RfP* is required to balance its distinct IRC building approaches with strategic issue-based alliance building with diverse partners and organizations.

Furthermore, while *RfP* recognizes only one interreligious entity per country as its national affiliate, there are a few cases where *RfP* recognizes multiple interreligious entities with a coordinating mechanism, and/or a rotating secretariat, agreed by local religious communities and interreligious organizations. As noted in the previous section, the development of an IRC is not as *linear* as the IRC Development matrix suggests; diverse national contexts require *contextualization, flexibility* and *adaptation.*

VI. ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES of DIFFERENT LEVELS OF IRCs

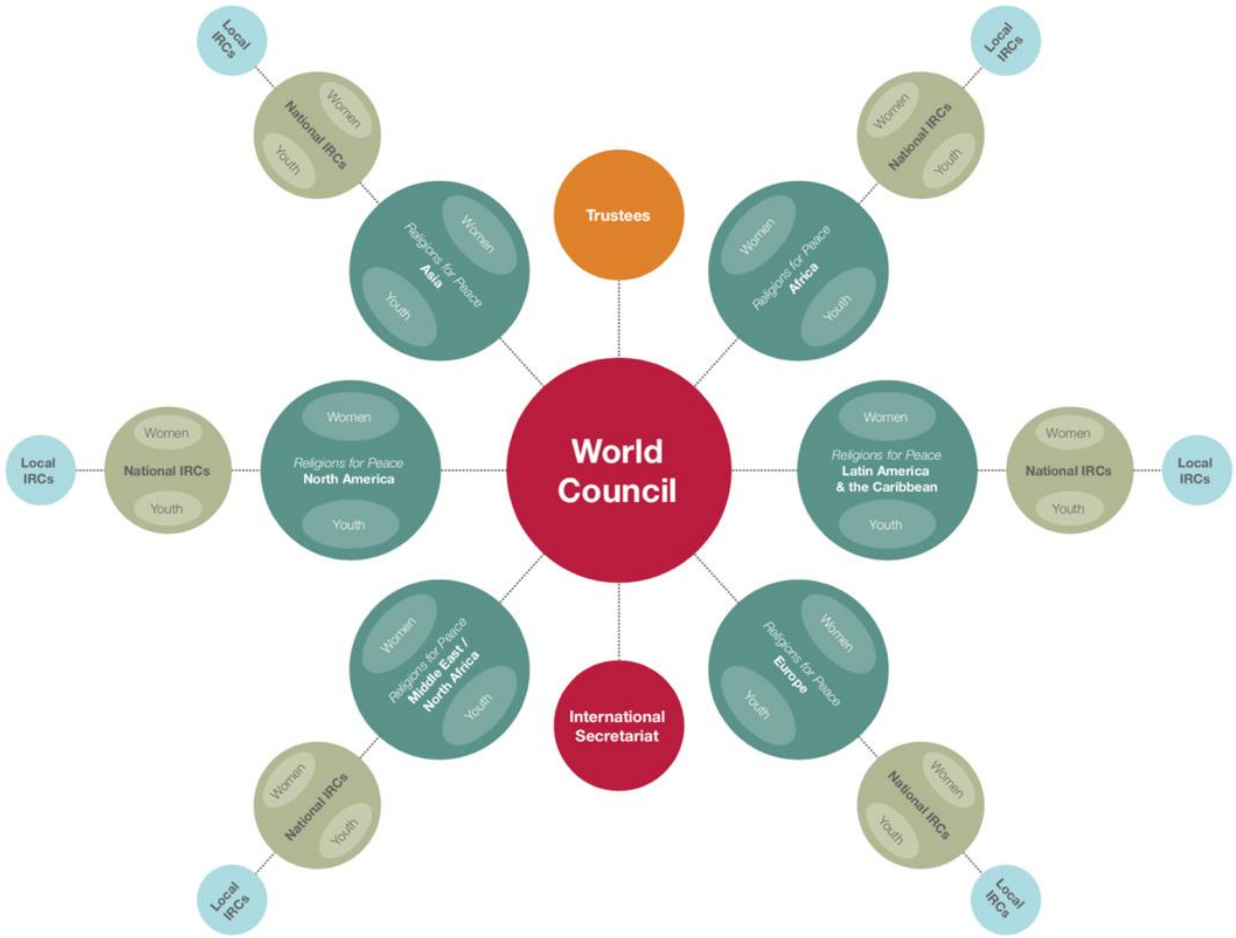
RfP works simultaneously on global, regional, national and local levels. This is a core strength. In a globalized world, the major challenges to peace typically manifest themselves on these multiple levels and thus need to be simultaneously addressed on these same levels in a coordinated way. *RfP* is able to do this because it is organized on, and maintains a network across, global, regional, national and local levels. *RfP*'s structure mirrors the fact that many religious communities are organized on these

same levels. The engaged presence of *RfP* on multiple levels positions the network to develop internal linkages and strategies to tackle concrete challenges from the global to the grassroots.

The *RfP* movement consists of its World Council; regional and national IRCs which encompass women and youth networks on these respective levels and their religious constituencies; and the Global Women of Faith Network and Global Interfaith Youth Network. IRCs are independent entities and also part of the global *RfP* movement through affiliation.

Article I-B of the *RfP* International Standing Rules notes the principle of *subsidiarity:* "local decisions and actions are taken at the local level, national decisions and actions at the national level, regional decisions and actions at the regional level, and world decisions and actions at the international level." Respecting the principle of *subsidiarity*, *RfP* International and its regional offices coordinate and collaborate in IRC building and capacity-building processes for national IRCs outlined in this paper.

Article II of the *RfP* International Standing Rules stipulates that the *RfP* International Executive Committee, serving on behalf of the World Council, has the sole legal authority to recognize a *RfP* affiliated national IRC and to grant the license to use names and symbols associated with *RfP*. Such affiliation can be a bilateral agreement between the *RfP* International through its International Executive Committee and the national IRC or a tripartite agreement among *RfP* International, the regional IRC and the national IRC. The affiliation agreement also specifies basic conditions and requirements for IRCs to be recognized as *RfP* affiliates and authorized to use *RfP*'s names and symbols. The affiliation agreement includes a mechanism to resolve any dispute and specify a process of termination of *RfP* recognition by the International Executive Committee.



While operating under the principle of *subsidiarity*, the *RfP* global movement has developed ways to strengthen connectivity and reciprocity between different levels of the organization. On governance, Chairs/Moderators of Regional IRCs are seconded to serve on the World Council. At the secretariat level, Regional Secretaries General serve as Regional Representatives of the International Secretary General. Most Regional IRCs have also developed ways to bring the leadership of National IRCs to the Board of Regional IRCs to ensure needed governance and operational connectivity and coordination between regional and national bodies.

Furthermore, a close coordination between *RfP* International, Regional and National IRCs is critical in program development and resource mobilization relevant to *RfP*'s six strategic goals. For international projects in partnership with Regional and National IRCs, proper agreements and necessary contracts are signed between *RfP* International and IRCs to identify clear roles and responsibilities and ensure financial and programmatic compliance.

VII. BUILDING & EQUIPPING IRCs FOR ACTION:

A Consultative Movement-wide Process

The draft IRC Development Strategy Paper was presented to the World Council in its meeting on 18 May 2020. Comments from the World Council and Honorary Presidents were solicited until 30 May and were duly incorporated into the current draft. On 1 June, an invitation to the first global webinar scheduled on 16 June was sent out to the World Council, Honorary Presidents, as well as leaders and representatives of all national and regional IRCs, women of faith and interfaith youth networks. The development of the agenda for the webinar, the outreach and coordination thereof, have been carried out by the Deputy Secretary General of *RfP* International, in close consultation and coordination with the International and Regional Secretaries General.

On 16 June 2020, the first *RfP* Global IRC Development Webinar brought together over 200 leaders and representatives of national and regional IRCs, women of faith and interfaith youth networks, as well as World Council, Honorary Presidents, Trustees and Ambassadors, from all regions of the world. The Webinar set in motion an inclusive and participatory *RfP* movement-wide process of discerning key elements of success and challenges for IRC development and formulating harmonized, coherent and coordinated policies, strategies, guidelines and processes with due consideration to regional and national contexts, specificities and adaptability.

Key issues/areas of IRC development that were highlighted during the deliberations in the first Global Webinar included:

- **Securing Representative and Inclusive Governance**, referring to representation/inclusion of all religious and spiritual institutions, and communities, in any given national or regional context, their respective youth and women's entities, with a view to their involvement in IRC leadership, governance and program development; as well as using the suggested IRC Development Capacity Building Matrix for a self-evaluation and capacity assessment by IRCs themselves.

- **Strengthening Strategic Communications and Visibility** of distinctive value-added of *RfP* IRCs, especially – albeit not only in contexts where there is an increasing presence of other interreligious actors/networks.

- **Supporting Institutional Sustainability** (mobilization of financial and human resources), and subsequent accountability, including options for contributed services from religious communities such as seconded staff in IRC secretariats.

- **Enhancing Humanitarian and Developmental Capacities** through Learning Exchange opportunities among IRCs across the RfP movement (intra- and inter-regionally), focused on the Covid experience and the RfP service mechanisms provided – the Multi-religious Humanitarian Fund.

Based upon the feedback and recommendations received in the first Global Webinar, *RfP* International, in coordination with Regional Offices, will convene a series of global and regional webinars and facilitate the process of strategic learning exchange among IRCs across the movement.

Simultaneous translation for Arabic, French and Spanish will be provided for all global webinars. Following every global webinar, regional webinars will be organized under the leadership of the *RfP* Regional Secretaries General, in coordination with *RfP* International Secretariat.

The following is the tentative schedule of the Global IRC Development Webinars in 2020:

	Themes	Key issues to be discussed	Speakers/Presenter	Date
1	**GOVERNANCE**	• Principles of Representativity and Inclusivity • Participation of all major religious and spiritual traditions • Leadership & engagement of women and youth in governance structures • Affiliation Agreement (clarifying responsibilities & reciprocity, and basic conditions for the use of *RfP* name, logo, and other symbols) • Organizational Capacity Assessment (OCA) based on IRC Development Matrix • IRC Directory Project	* To be nominated by Regional Secretaries General in respective consultations with national IRCs	**July 28 2020**
2	**MEDIA & COMMUNICATIONS**	• Visibility and advancement of the *RfP*'s specific multi-religious identity and mission • Communications Strategy as part of the *RfP* Strategic Plan • IRC communications capacity assessment • Use of social media and other digital platforms • News & human-interest story template	*To be nominated by Regional Secretaries General in respective consultations with national IRCs	**Sep. 9 2020**
3	**FINANCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY & MOBILIZATION of RESOURCES**	• Institutional sustainability • Contributed services by religious communities, including secondment to IRC secretariats • Financial reporting & compliance • Proposal development • Partnership development	*To be nominated by Regional Secretaries General in respective consultations with national IRCs	**Sep. 30 2020**
4	**INTERRELIGIOUS HUMANITARIAN & DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE**	• *RfP* Multi-religious Humanitarian Fund: its initial outputs, successes and challenges • IRC capacity assessment in humanitarian assistance and other direct service delivery • Partnership with humanitarian FBOs • IRC becoming a multi-religious convener for humanitarian FBOs	*To be nominated by Regional Secretaries General in respective consultations with national IRCs	**Oct. 21 2020**