Global Pledge for Action by Religious Actors and Faith-Based Organizations to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic in Collaboration with the United Nations

Peer-to-peer Learning Snapshots and Recommendations

On 28 May 2020, the Office of the Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG), the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) convened an inclusive consultation with a group of more than 40 religious leaders and actors and faith-based organizations to explore innovative ways to partner in the response to COVID-19, and discuss relevant thematic and possible actions and initiatives. The consultation resulted in the [Global Pledge for Action by Religious Actors and Faith-Based Organizations to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic in collaboration with the United Nations](#).[1] The Pledge includes a declaration by religious leaders and actors with assurances and commitments in response to COVID-19, and a mapping of ongoing activities and possible areas of collaboration with the United Nations.

With the objective of translating the Global Pledge for Action into specific actions for further collaboration and enhanced partnership between the United Nations and faith actors, OSAPG, UNAOC and OHCHR organized six monthly webinars from December 2020 until May 2021.

In accordance with the priorities and cross-cutting issues identified by the signatories of the Global Pledge for Action, with a clear focus on addressing and countering COVID-19 related hate speech, interfaith dialogue and capacity-building, each webinar addressed the following topics: the role and experiences of faith actors in promoting gender equality; addressing and countering hate speech; safeguarding religious sites; protecting religious or belief minorities; preventing atrocity crimes; and moderation of religious discourse and the nexus to promoting interfaith dialogue, mutual respect and understanding. Pertinent background documents are hyperlinked in Annex I.

Webinars consisted of peer-to-peer learning exchanges among an ample spectrum of representatives from religious and faith-based organizations, civil society organizations and human rights mechanisms. There was a strong emphasis on sharing learning experiences based on concrete actions and initiatives undertaken by participants in the webinars, as well as on action-oriented recommendations. Each webinar included a maximum of 50 participants and discussions were framed by a total of 30 experts in the respective fields (fully gender-balanced, see Annex II).

The following peer-to-peer learning snapshots and recommendations were identified in the webinars:

Webinar I. "Gender equality in the context of COVID-19" (7 December 2020)

Peer-to-peer learning snapshots:

- **Engagement and inclusion:** It is important to engage in a dialogue with organizations and actors who are not yet convinced of human rights based approaches. There is a need to not look at the religious actors as homogenous players. Rather, it is important to seek scholars who would speak up for the protection of women's safety, physical integrity and the right to be free from violence.

- **Shared values but different language:** Civil society organizations as well as religious and faith groups might have a common understanding of issues at stake and may share the same values for combating gender inequality and violence. However, they sometimes use different terminology which alienates their eventual goals.
- **Mutual literacy and harvest of collective thinking:** There is a need to promote both religious literacy among secular organizations and human rights literacy among religious organizations. At times, there exists misunderstanding of the root causes of gender-based violence by religious leaders which can create additional obstacles to civil society. Religious texts often contain the same narratives on gender equality; however, different approaches to education raise obstacles and misunderstanding among faith communities. On the other hand, there is a need for greater understanding around freedom of religion or belief, as it is often used as an easy excuse for preventing progress on gender and inclusive legislation. A one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective for overcoming radical views and pursuing human rights agenda, in particular, gender equality among faith-based organizations and religious leaders.
- **Safe space:** It is important to create a "safe place" for holding debates between women's rights organizations and religious leaders to find a common definition. Restore trust to discuss key topics, such as obedience, punishment, marital rape and custody.
- **UN's role:** The UN can moderate or even facilitate the creation of such 'safe' spaces. It also brings important normative human rights frameworks, soft-law standards and a peer-to-peer learning methodology to engage with religious actors on issues of faith and human rights. It is key to invite women to the negotiation table in peace processes and to integrate human rights in peace-building.
- **Role of social media:** There is a need to monitor the role of social media and transmitted messages, which might further escalate the level of intolerance or incite to hatred and violence.

Action oriented recommendations:

- **Promotion of human rights approach and engagement:** Engage a variety of faith-based organizations and religious leaders to promote the realization of gender equality by communicating with both, proponents and opponents. Build bridges between secular actors and religious and faith-based actors through common grounds to combat gender inequalities. Disseminate information and educational materials on gender equality appealing to general public, including secular and faith actors, rural communities, etc. and avoid terminology that can further resistance.
- **Facilitation of dialogue:** Understand and learn about different religions or beliefs and find common language. Create platforms for the exchange of views between different faith-based organizations, religious leaders, civil society organizations and human rights mechanisms to strengthen their dialogue. Break the silos and address the presumption that working on religious freedom automatically excludes gender equality, that religion and women's rights do not match. Articulate a common language on the ground issues and include all groups. Promote literacy on human rights-based approach.
- **Active participation and synergies:** Engage in each other's world and promote active participation among all concerned and less convinced, e.g. by joining forces with women's rights organizations and religious leaders to make a change. Link SDGs to the action.
- **Tailor-made partnerships and horizontal interaction:** Seek and provide gender socialisation opportunities and adapt advocacy to each individual situation. Engage in peer-to-peer learning to further gender equality.
- **Decision-making:** Strengthen capacities and provide opportunities for inclusion of women and girls in the decision-making process.
- **Active outreach:** Address gender-based violence during the COVID-19 lockdown and reach out to survivors during the pandemic. Inform victims that it is not a lockdown of services, rather reflect on mediums to deliver assistance in such restrictions (cooperation with churches, targeted broadcasting to communities, etc.).

Webinar II. "COVID-19 related Hate Speech and Beyond" (28 January 2021)

Peer-to-peer learning snapshots:

- **Engagement and inclusion:** Grassroots organisations and members of communities play an essential role in addressing and countering hate speech. The grassroots space is also where religious and inter-religious collaboration happens, including in regard to fighting hate speech.
- **Focus on minorities**: The main target of hate speech, xenophobia, stigmatization and discrimination, including related to COVID-19 and through social media, are minorities.
- **Role of governments:** Hate speech may be perpetuated by powerful governments, in collusion with civic forces.
- **Accountability of multi-faith efforts:** It is not only governments who have to follow up or be followed up with/held accountable but religious institutions too. The rhetoric and actions of even multi-religious and broad civic societies, remains too divided. We know the problems - what are we each, and together, doing? Progressive religious voices can also face backlash and harassment when they protect and promote human rights. How are religious actors supporting these voices?
- **Learning and education:** The power of education to build community resilience and fight stereotypes cannot be overstressed. Communities affected by hate speech have a lot to teach in terms of their experiences and perspectives.
- **Online hate speech:** Despite growing engagement by social media to prevent incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence and counter hate speech, online hate speech trends remain very worrisome.
- **Remedial hate speech:** Remedial speech cannot be reduced to a bureaucratic condemnation of hate speech. There is more to it, including positive and alternative narratives.
- **Opportunity for change**: the pandemic offers an opportunity for positive behavioural change. Religious leaders and actors have a strong responsibility in this endeavour.
- **UN's role:** As neutral actor, the UN can moderate or even facilitate the creation of 'safe spaces' to discuss ways faith-based organizations can counter and address hate speech. It also brings important normative human rights framework, soft-law standards and peer-to-peer learning methodology to engage with religious actors on issues of faith and human rights.

Action oriented recommendations:

- **Strengthen multi-religious efforts:** Faith-based organizations need to strengthen their collaboration and do much more to combat COVID-19 and its socio-economic impacts, including hate speech.
- **Strengthen action to protect minorities:** Depending on the context, affected groups may vary. A focus on refugees and migrants needs to be included when countering and addressing hate speech, xenophobia and discrimination. Technology can help to be closer to minorities during the pandemic.
- **Inclusion:** Include more non-Abrahamic participants in future meetings and webinars.
- **Address political manipulation of religion:** Explore ways to define and manage this phenomenon that exacerbates hate speech.
- **Engage governments:** It is essential that the UN continue to engage governments in countering and addressing hate speech as a way to support FBO's work.
- **Engage social media companies:** Continue engaging these companies with the purpose to use their platforms for the good, including for going beyond mere condemnation speech and include remedial speech into their platforms. It is also important that human rights organizations set a framework for advocacy with social media on their business model that is benefiting from hate and little incentive to tackle it. All social media platforms should have a human rights office and include this in their policies. This is where UN can do a lot more to push social media companies.
- **Support and promote grassroots initiatives:** Ensure that voices of expertise and experience from the field become important examples to learn from by providing a platform for them to share their wisdom. Also, support religious actors who stand up for human rights.

- **Support interfaith initiatives:** Promote interfaith dialogue initiatives, including by minorities on promoting the dignity of other minorities, and help give these initiatives an international profile.
- **Active participation and synergies:** Advance and reinforce ongoing collaboration. Promote active participation among all concerned, especially the less convinced.
- **Tailor-made partnerships and horizontal interaction:** Seek and provide convening opportunities and adapt advocacy to each individual situation. Engage in peer-to-peer learning to further the fight against hate speech, xenophobia, stigmatisation and discrimination incrementally, bottom up and in a sustainable attitude change mode.
- Establish a **UN depository platform** for the role of faith actors in countering and addressing hate speech

Webinar III. "The Safeguard of Religious Sites" (25 February 2021)

Peer-to-peer learning snapshots:

- **Addressing root causes:** Religious conflicts are normally the manifestation of other underlying causes. The root causes of the situation/conflict at stake should be addressed through dialogue. If left unattended, generation after generation will perpetuate ignorance about each other, which, in turn, will fuel fear, prejudice and misconceptions.
- **Role of youth:** It is particularly important to promote dialogue and mutual knowledge and understanding among the younger generation, starting with children at school.
- **Role of social media:** Young people in particular have to take a proactive role on social media in the fight against hate speech, including instances when it is important to come together to help safeguard religious sites. It is important to share stories where people have come together to protect religious sites.
- **Social cohesion:** Individual action is crucial for the fight against hate speech, including the safeguard of religious sites. Social cohesion comes from the sum of our individual actions and commitment to reaching out to one another to start building understanding. Social cohesion is all the more important in plural and diverse societies.
- **Religious leadership:** Religious leaders can change the pervasive and harmful claims of privileged access to the truth. Its use and misuse are very serious issues which fuel ignorance.
- **Interfaith dialogue:** It is important to understand that that there is only one way to address hatred and build inclusive societies: dialogue, living together and understanding each other. Interfaith dialogue can play an important role in this regard.
- **Universality of religious sites as a reflection of the oneness of humanity versus otherness:** An attack against one religious site is an attack against all. Fostering unity and community building projects can prevent the perception of otherness that leads to division and fragmentation and result in confrontation and hatred.
- **Combatting online hate speech:** Legislation is one important aspect which needs further development in countries around the world.
- **Speak out when others are attacked:** Outreach to those communities that have been attacked. Campaigns can be organized to foster unity and solidarity.

Action oriented recommendations:

- **Education:** One approach that was shared during the webinar is the 'Basis Theory', which has three main components: critical thinking; intellectual knowledge of religion beyond its spiritual meaning; and increased informal interaction among people from different religions and backgrounds to promote dialogue among them. One example of the latter is multi-faith prayer in which people from different religions say their prayers in turn. It is also important to create a safe space in which anyone can ask questions.

- **Interfaith tours:** These tours have been organized in the past and could resume when the health situation permits. The tours include meetings with young people involved in peacebuilding initiatives all around the world. Participants discuss ways to address hate speech, prejudice and misconceptions and they come back to their countries with ideas and tools to take action.
- **Use of virtual reality:** This tool allows people to visit other's places of worship and it is worth exploring further in the context of the pandemic.
- **Nights of religions:** They are organized in collaboration with the local authorities and enable interactions among people of different faiths. The visits include presentations about ceremonies in the places of worship, which help dispel misperceptions and result in more respect and understanding of each other.
- **Establishment of youth voluntary associations:** The example from Nigeria showcasing the mobilization of youth from Christian and Muslim faiths in the fight against hate speech and the safeguard of religious sites was encouraging. Youth from different religions congregate in each other's places of worship to show solidarity and help safeguard religious sites. Youth mobilization can lead to further engagement on other issues important for the community and, therefore, result in further dialogue and solidarity in the longer term. The engagement of women is particularly important in this regard.
- **Empowering religious actors:** It is important to strengthen peer-to-peer learning among religious actors and empowering them with interdisciplinary knowledge and methodologies, so that they can address hate speech and render religious sites centers of knowledge and remedial spiritual power.
- **Organization of dialogue events:** Each event brings together a small group of people with different backgrounds and religions around a main activity, including debates, games and visits to religious sites. The objective is to trigger curiosity and challenge preconceived ideas. Dialogue events lead to discussions about current issues and can result in actions to deal with them.
- **Circles of peace:** In the aftermath of attacks against religious sites, circles of peace can be organized by people of different faiths around the religious site which has been attacked.
- **Crisis management assistance.**
- **Anti-bias training with the younger leadership and younger generations**: This training is geared towards one's own community. The objective is to take a good look at ourselves and where we come from and find what kind of bias we bring to the conversation, even if it is unconscious. This soul-searching exercise helps come prepared for dialogue with others.
- **Religious sites can be offered to other confessions and also be used for community service**. During the pandemic, some religious sites served as food distribution centers. If for any reason, a community cannot use their holy sites (natural disaster, etc.) other faiths can offer the affected communities their own religious sites for a particular religious celebration.

Webinar IV. "Protecting religious or belief minorities in the context of COVID-19" (30 March 2021)

Peer-to-peer learning snapshots:

- **Need to prioritize social inclusion and promote sensitive language towards minorities and vulnerable groups.** In addition to health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted further human rights challenges and violations, such as scapegoating, hate speech, harmful disinformation and violence against religious or belief minorities, which has further exacerbated their exclusion. Online and offline messages have included rumours and conspiracy theories vis-à-vis some communities. Some health-related information was not accessible to all or not available in minority languages. Certain religious or belief minorities had to rely on information shared through their networks and other communities have had difficulties to access vaccinations settings from remote areas.
- **Need for community support and inter-faith action-oriented dialogue.** Many religious or belief groups have moved their religious activities online, which enabled them to reach out to wider communities online. The pandemic and its challenges prompted for example a religious minority to

expand its community service, carrying out fundraising within their own community on a monthly basis and distributing help to others in need (sharing basic safety items). Such community service during the pandemic has led to broader acceptance of this religious minority within the society.

- **Safeguarding religious practices in the context of COVID-19** – for example, religious and belief communities in Argentina were consulted on acceptable practices in case of bereavements.
- **Three pillar-approach: Inclusion, Resilience, Diversity to enhance the work of communities and engage with youth.** Work with youth within religious communities in Lebanon for example has resulted in empowering them and strengthening their skills. In the midst of the pandemic, they became positive influencers and change-makers in their own communities (everyone was involved irrespective of their affiliation), where they have implemented social action projects, focussing on education, health related campaign, social and economic support.
- **Key commitment from State authorities to address hate crime is necessary**. During the pandemic, hate-based attacks against religious or belief minorities have been exacerbated even further. Despite existing legislation against hate crime in many States, these laws have often remained unenforced. Hence, in addition to such legislation, a stronger commitment from States needs to be demonstrated by carrying out regular training/updates for law enforcement and the judiciary to implement such legislation in practice remains equally important. Furthermore, the issue of bias, even in its most subtle forms, should be addressed by States and non-state actors alike in confronting hate crime.
- **Constructive resilience and transformative role played by civil society and religious or belief minorities.** During the most critical of times, civil society in collaboration with religious or belief minorities have mobilized jointly to report and record hate crime incidents. In this connection, they have retained a sense of powerful agency during the pre- and post-pandemic times as well as showcased mobilisation and mutual support when reporting and recording the hate-related crimes and engagement with the relevant response mechanisms, despite a continuous shrinking civic space.

Action-oriented recommendations:

- **Appropriate, inclusive and sensitive vaccination campaign.** To overcome any exclusion and faith-based hurdles, vaccination campaigns aimed at fighting the COVID-19 pandemic should communicate lifesaving message through a non-discriminatory, sensitive, inclusive and fact-based language acceptable to all religious or belief minorities and groups.
- **Community service as a bridge to broader acceptance.** To enhance community service and activities in times of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic, among different communities jointly can result in wider acceptance of a minority group by the majority.
- **Building inter-faith communication and relationships to exercise rights.** To organize collective inter-faith actions among different religious or belief groups that can provide support and strengthening of religious minorities and majorities even during times of social distancing.
- **Education on diversity and inclusion**. To encourage active and inclusive participation among all people (irrespective of citizenship, residence or migration status, religious or belief affiliation etc.) through collective actions and idea-sharing platforms. Promote mutual respect for the human rights of religious or belief minorities, including through peer-to-peer learning, practical outreach tools, capacity-building programmes and interdisciplinary research on questions related to faith and rights.
- **Religious social responsibility – solidarity and human dignity to provide assistance, including mental support**. Need to advocate for a two-pronged approach of "religious social responsibility" (alluding to the notion of "corporate social responsibility"): (a) religious communities should support anyone regardless of their background or religious/belief membership or no affiliation; and (b) international organizations and governments should support inter-faith communication and action, aspiring for collaboration with and among religious or belief communities and institutions for more inclusive societies, e.g. through the "Faith for Rights" framework.
- **Collaboration is essential and critical**. Due to shrinking civic space in several regions of the world, building networks and coalitions involving minorities and other marginalized groups are vital for inclusive societies; majority representatives voicing support for minority communities and sharing

their places of worship provide [good examples](#) of standing up for the right to participate equally and effectively in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life ([commitment VI](#) on "Faith for Rights").

- **Better understanding of the notions of intersectionality and multiple identities.** To strengthen inclusive society with a focus on the human being, rather than such person's origin or religious/belief affiliation, and to give voice to those we hear the least.
- **Interplay between human rights and fundamental freedoms**. Need to adopt a careful approach when restricting rights and freedoms in the midst of the pandemic (reference was provided to limitations of or [derogations](#) from certain civil and political rights during states of emergencies, such as freedom of religion or belief enshrined in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief).

Webinar V. "Preventing Atrocity Crimes in the context of COVID-19 and beyond" (29 April 2021)

Peer-to-peer learning snapshots:

- **Gradual procession of atrocity crimes.** Evidenced from past experiences, atrocity crimes are gradual processes which result from an often-noticeable string of events. This includes increases in hate speech, hateful rhetoric, racism, government restrictions to protected groups, discrimination, etc., such as is being seen now through an increase in racism and government-led discrimination as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **Fostering trust**. The importance of civil society organizations, religious and faith-based organizations, and peacekeeping organizations building trust and fostering friendship within communities cannot be understated in the context of countering the spread of misinformation and discrimination.
- **Role of smaller organizations.** While large international organizations carry a responsibility to prevent atrocity crimes, smaller civil society actors, religious leaders and human rights activists play a critical role in community dialogue and atrocity prevention at the local level.
- **Capacity and resource allocation.** "*Who* we fund and *how* we fund matters as much as *what* we fund" (Sapna Chhaptar Consodine). Capacity and access to resources, both financial and otherwise, are some of the greatest hindrances for community-level organizations working to fight hate and prevent atrocity crimes. The availability of resources to small and local projects continues to be instrumental in community dialogue aimed at preventing atrocity crimes.
- **Role of governments.** Increasingly, governments are instituting Covid-19 mandated lockdowns. These often lead to greater increases in domestic violence, discrimination of minorities and migrants, and the perpetuation of hateful rhetoric targeting those who have become the scapegoats for the pandemic, often minority populations.
- **Opportunity for change**. COVID, divisions, lack of access to resources and others all kill while solidarity, respect and an understanding of our shared humanity protects. Therefore, while the Covid-19 pandemic has served as a breeding ground for fear and uncertainties it has allowed a space for people to see our shared humanity as it has fostered partnerships under so many fronts.
- **Weaponizing freedom of religion and belief.** The claim to the need to express religious belief that has gone against governments' covid regulations, such as opening churches and putting people at risk of infection, abuses the call for freedom of religion.
- **Scapegoating.** Minorities, and particularly refugees, are being scapegoated with regard to supposed threats to national security or spread of COVID, and these excuses lead to violations of human rights and the refugee convention. This trend continues to be increasingly worrisome with vulnerable individuals and groups being put at risk through lack of access to healthcare, resources, freedom of movement, etc. COVID-19 related restrictions also limit the availability of a humanitarian response to address these concerns and increases the risk of atrocity crimes.

Action-oriented recommendations:

- **A call on the United Nations** to fulfil their responsibility to work collaboratively with a greater variety of organizations as a means to create new avenues for smaller organizations to achieve positive results in relation to countering and addressing hate speech and preventing atrocity crimes.
- **Engage governments.** Judicial systems, which respect human rights, are essential. Accountability must be a priority as impunity allows for the perceived continuation of atrocity crimes.
- **Strengthen local efforts.** Peacekeeping through local communities, even once conflict or hateful rhetoric has spread beyond the community level, must be a priority in order to address the spread of hate speech and dis/misinformation.
- **Address the spread of hate and misinformation.** Local voices, doing the work within their communities need to be highlighted, shared and supported. There must be concerted efforts on all levels to ensure that misinformation and misinterpretations of religion do not become the most believed and practiced by societies.
- **Address root causes.** With minorities becoming the new scapegoats for the pandemic, not enough has been done for their benefit. While focusing still on the causes of this discrimination and hate, more must be done to effectively address the needs of minorities subjected to hate and discrimination in the name of the pandemic. This must be highlighted to effectively understand and therefore address the root causes of atrocity crimes.
- **Further engage and support civil society**. Civil society has the unique position of access to both citizen populations as well as governing officials. Civil society actors and organizations must work to connect the government authorities and citizen populations to foster dialogue towards peaceful solutions of conflicts and atrocity crimes. These actors are tasked not only with engaging all relevant stakeholders but also with collecting data and analysing the present risk factors in order to transmit information and recommendations to the relevant parties.
- **Adaptation.** All actors must be open and willing to adapt to environmental and logistical challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **Resource allocation.** As we have learned the significance of civil society organizations, resources need to be allocated to these community-based organizations in order to meet realistic capacity requirements to contribute to atrocity prevention.
- **A call on religious leaders and organizations** to strive to reconciling freedom of religion or belief and every other human right, such as described in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Webinar VI. "Moderation of the Religious Discourse: the nexus to promoting interfaith dialogue, mutual respect and understanding" (27 May 2021)

Peer-to-peer learning snapshots:

- **Social media** is an important tool for faith actors and should play a role in stressing that religion is a source of inspiration and hope.
- Many **secular organizations** are engaging with religious organizations to promote similar values. This is a welcome trend which can foster the universal messages contained in different religious traditions.
- It is important to approach interfaith dialogue, mutual respect and understanding through a **multidisciplinary approach** which enhances inclusive narratives.
- All interreligious work has a **peacebuilding component**.
- A **non-reactive approach** to events by religious leaders and actors can help bring about a calmer and open discussion.
- Knowledge of religious texts and teachings is essential. These days there is less and less focus on **religious literacy**. We are not witnessing a clash of civilisations, but rather a clash of ignorance or a clash of understanding.

- One of the main challenges of religious leaders and faith-based actors is to **respect differences** while upholding truth, peace and justice.
- Religious teaching has an **introspective component** in which religious leaders, faith-based actors and teachers need to go through their own soul-searching process before they can provide answers to others.
- The role of religious institutions is crucial particularly due to misinformation and conspiracies questioning scientific facts and findings in the context of the **COVID-19 pandemic**. For example, Al Azhar has played a key role in disseminating scientific-based information in accordance with WHO's policies and recommendations. It has also been instrumental in advising different countries and clarifying issues related to the pandemic in different languages.
- The fact that all major religions **share a number of important values and principles** has to be part of interfaith dialogue.
- It is important to **recognize and celebrate differences** and find constructive ways to channel them to foster moderation and understanding.
- Religious leaders' identities and beliefs are not blurred by dialogue with other religions. Moderation is not neutrality, but rather the **ability to facilitate conversations** within religions and with other religions.

Action oriented recommendations:

- **School of interreligious journalists** comprising representatives of the three Abrahamic faiths is a good example of an initiative contributing to countering hate speech and working with women religious leaders to educate young women.
- A practical example of a **joint study of the Torah and the Koran** led by religious actors has helped discover similarities and celebrate common ground.
- **Religious leaders and faith-based actors** can play a crucial role in facilitating conversations, promoting education, taking down defence mechanisms and opening conversations.
- Displaying what **daily life** is for religious actors can help dispel misconceptions and suspicions since everyone can relate to our shared humanity.
- The influence that religious leaders, actors and FBOs have on their communities continues to be a very important tool to spread truth, particularly in this day and age of **social media** and also taking into consideration the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Conversations facilitated by religious leaders and actors should be based on **open dialogue**, avoid emotional reactions, and encourage knowledge and education.
- It is also recommended that religious leaders and actors **create spaces** where others can be humanized and where the conversation can delve into personal stories from real people that can bring everyone together.
- Creating spaces for **disagreement** to happen is also key. Religious leaders and actors have to be bold in discussing issues that they find irreconcilable. The key is to identify ways to disagree in a constructive manner that leads to mutual understanding and solutions to real life issues confronting our communities.
- A concrete recommendation shared during the webinar refers to meetings conducted in person before the pandemic and online ever since when religious actors work with the younger generation to **discuss key topics in 'grey spaces'** where there are always knowledgeable mentors equipped to provide answers and address issues of concern. Conversations have covered issues such as empathy, hospitality, mourning, etc.
- A concrete experience undertaken in Nigeria under the leadership of the Strength in Diversity Development Centre that can serve as an inspiration to others includes a **program in national TV** in which leaders of the three Abrahamic faiths discuss key issues such as humanity and common norms, development, or the protection of human life. The program will be broadcast on social media.

Background documents

- Global Pledge for Action by Religious Actors and Faith-Based Organizations to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic in Collaboration with the United Nations

- A Joint call for Solidarity, Compassion and Unity, by Miguel Moratinos, the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and Adama Dieng, the Special Advisor for the Prevention of Genocide;

- Secretary-General Appeal for Global Ceasefire;

- Secretary-General Global Humanitarian Appeal to Combat COVID-19;

- Secretary-General Report on the Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19, Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity;

- Global Multi-religious Faith-in-Action COVID initiative;

- "Faith for Rights" framework and #Faith4Rights toolkit;

- United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites;

- UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech;

- Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together;

- Statement of Solidarity from the New Alliance of Virtue;

- SG Global Appeal to Address and Counter COVID-19 related Hate Speech

- United Nations Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate speech

- Joint Statement of the UN Interagency Multi Task Force for Religion and Sustainable Development;

- Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes;

- UN expert warns against religious hatred and intolerance during COVID-19 outbreak

- Rise in antisemitic hatred during COVID-19 must be countered with tougher measures, says UN expert

Framing the discussion: Participating Experts

Webinar I. "Gender equality in the context of COVID-19" (7 December 2020)

1. **Nahla Haidar,** Member of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
2. **Ahmed Shaheed**, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
3. **Ghida Anani**, Director of Abaad Lebanon
4. **Samuel Jayakumar**, Coordinator of South Asian Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief

Webinar II. "COVID-19 related Hate Speech and Beyond" (28 January 2021)

1. **Fernand de Varennes,** Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues
2. **Ahmed Shaheed**, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
3. **Azza Karam,** Secretary-General of Religions for Peace
4. **Bani Dugal,** Director of the Baha'i International Office in New York and co-Chair of the Multi-Faith Advisory Council to the UN IATF on Religion and Development

Webinar III. "The Safeguard of Religious Sites" (25 February 2021)

1. **Chaker Khazaal**, Author and Activist
2. **Ayu Kartika Dewi**, Managing Director at Indika Foundation, Indonesia
3. **Pastor James Movel Wuye,** Interfaith Mediation Center, Nigeria
4. **Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa**, Interfaith Mediation Center, Nigeria
5. **Benedicte Charrier**, Vice President of Coexister, France

Webinar IV. "Protecting religious or belief minorities in the context of COVID-19" (30 March 2021)

1. **Fernand de Varennes**, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues
2. **Nina Noor**, Programme Executive Globethics.net
3. **Rabbi Marcelo Polakoff**, Commissioner for Interfaith Dialogue of the Latin American Jewish Congress
4. **Ana Maria Daou**, Head of Adyan's research unit and Deputy Coordinator of the Interfaith Youth Committee of Religions for Peace
5. **Kishan Manocha**, Head of Tolerance and Non-Discrimination at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, ODIHR
6. **Ahmed Shaheed**, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
7. **Elizabeth O'Casey**, Director of Advocacy at Humanists International
8. **Diane Ala'i**, Representative of the Baha'i International Community to the UN in Geneva
9. **Iqtidar Cheema**, Director of the Institute for Leadership and Community Development

Webinar V. "Preventing Atrocity Crimes in the context of COVID-19 and beyond" (29 April 2021)

1. **Professor Jean Marie Katamali**, Ohio State University
2. **Sapna Chhaptar Consodine**, Director at Strategy for Humanity
3. **Andrea Bartoli**, President, Sant'Egidio Foundation for Peace and Dialogue
4. **Christen Broecker**, Deputy Director, Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights
5. **Tayab Bashar**, Save and Serve Foundation, Bangladesh

Webinar VI. "Moderation of the Religious Discourse: the nexus to promoting interfaith dialogue, mutual respect and understanding" (27 May 2021)

1. **Taras Dzuybanskyy**, Theologian, Sr Alumni Advisor of the John Paul II Center for IRD in Rome
2. **Rabbi Julien Darmon**, Program Director at Al-Ghazzali Institute in Paris
3. **Hossam Ed-Deen Allam**, Al Azhar Fatwa Global Center & Lecturer at Al Azhar University, Egypt
4. **Rabbi Hannah Kingston**, Rabbi at Alyth Synagogue of the North Western Reform Synagogue, United Kingdom
5. **Imam Sabah Ahmedi**, Seminary of the Ahmadiyya community, United Kingdom
6. **Georgia May**, Rose Castle Foundation, United Kingdom