

ANNEX:
UN System activities in the field of interreligious and intercultural cooperation

Working with cultural and religious partners is critical to meet the Millennium Development Goals in 2015. UNESCO and UNFPA are two UN agencies that have done much work with Swiss, German, French and Swedish assistance. Culture is the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, which encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs". Culture is a positive resource. One's own values matter, if we aim to bring change and transformation from inside. Partnering with faith based organizations is not new to UNESCO and UNFPA, because FBOs commonly provide 80% of the basic social services and its leaders are a main point of reference in the communities where people turn to for advice. This rich experience now needs to be systematized.

UNESCO is entrusted with the mandate to build "the defenses of peace in the minds of men" through five fields of competence: education, culture, sciences, communication and information. Intercultural dialogue, together with poverty alleviation, sustainable development and peace building constitute the core elements of UNESCO's mission. In a globalizing world, intercultural dialogue is becoming a new paradigm to meet contemporary challenges, in which context, interfaith dialogue is an essential component. UNESCO fulfills its functions as: i) a laboratory of ideas (i.e., reaching shared understandings on language differences on complex issues); ii) a standard-setting body (i.e., UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of 2001); iii) a clearing house to share facts, lessons and good practices (i.e. the database "UNESCO Platform on Learning from the Practice of Intercultural Dialogue-Experience, Methods, Tools"); iv) a capacity-building mechanism working closely with Member States (i.e. "Mainstreaming Principles of Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue in Policies for Sustainable Development"); and v) a catalyst for international cooperation (i.e. UNESCO Chairs on Intercultural Dialogue). UNESCO's Strategy for 2008-2013 highlights the importance of exchange and dialogue among cultures for social cohesion, reconciliation and peace, and promotes cultural diversity as inseparable from dialogue. At (sub) regional initiatives, including traditional, religious, women and youth leaders, UNESCO underscores the role of quality education and respecting human rights perspectives in different cultural settings. The Dakar Education For All goals stress the role played by culture, as a vehicle for reconciliation in conflict or post-conflict situations, and the importance of free, independent and pluralistic media in promoting mutual understanding.

UNFPA developed a vision to partner with faith based and cultural organizations on issues of reproductive health, gender equality, population and development thirty years ago, when it helped establish the International Centre for Population Research in the Al Azhar University in Cairo. This approach was reaffirmed in 1994 with the International Conference on Population and Development. As a result of this experience and building on a series of regional consultations and trainings, UNFPA developed a 'cultural lens' as part of its 'culturally sensitive approach to programming" building on human rights and gender equality considerations. This is documented in its report on Culture Matters (2004). UNFPA will continue to conduct trainings on culturally sensitive approaches for various UN Country Teams over the course of 2008, build a global network of faith based women's organizations and host regional faith-based consultations, to culminate in UNFPA's Global Forum for faith-based development partnerships in October 2008 in Istanbul.

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat (UN/DESA) has a longstanding involvement in intercultural issues. As the UN entity servicing the Economic and Social Council, including its Commission on Social Development and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, UN/DESA produces extensive policy analyses and normative work on issues such as social inclusion and the status of indigenous peoples. This work always seeks to promote

intercultural dialogue within and among communities. UN/DESA is moreover mandated to bring various entities of the UN system together in support of the intergovernmental process; hence, it is in charge of supervising documentation submitted to the General Assembly on the culture of peace, intercultural and interfaith dialogue and the dialogue among civilizations and provides secretariat support to debates on related agenda items, in close collaboration with UN family organizations.

The Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) aims to improve understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions and, in the process, to help counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism. It was established in 2005, at the initiative of the Governments of Spain and Turkey, under the auspices of the United Nations. In April 2007, the United Nations Secretary-General appointed Mr. Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal, as High Representative for the Alliance. The AoC is supported by a Group of Friends – a community of over 70 member countries and international organizations and bodies. Working in partnership with governments, international and regional organizations, civil society groups, foundations and the private sector, the AoC is supporting a range of initiatives aimed at building bridges among a diversity of cultures and communities (i.e. an online clearinghouse of best practices, materials and resources on cross-cultural dialogue projects, a Rapid Response Media Mechanism to provide platforms for constructive debate at times of increased tensions around cross-cultural issues). In January 2008, the AoC will host its first global Forum in Madrid to develop partnerships and launch initiatives to support cross-cultural understanding.