

Concept Note

Informal Interactive Hearing with Civil Society

2007 High-level Dialogue of the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

Background:

On 25 May 2007, the General Assembly adopted draft resolution A/61/L.60 entitled "High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace". The Office of the President of the United Nations General Assembly has convened a 'Task Force' of civil society representatives to help ensure the effective participation of civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector, in the High-level Dialogue, scheduled to be held on 4 and 5 October 2007.

The great need for *Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace* is a theme that has attracted increased attention amongst governments, UN agencies, religious communities, spiritual movements, civil society and humanists at the beginning of the 21st century.

The effects of globalization processes, international travel and migration, the fast-expanding capacities of communication, tensions amongst diverse ethnic and religious groups, the realities of war, worldwide threats of terrorism, and the grave consequences of global climate change, have all highlighted the urgent need to deepen the cooperation and understanding between cultures, religions, and civilizations. Multi-stakeholder partnerships need to be developed to respond effectively to these global crises, enabling the shared engagement of very diverse constituencies.

The General Assembly Resolution A/61/221 entitled "Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace" adopted on 20 December 2006 by all Member States provides a good introduction to the theme of interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace, acknowledging the importance of freedom of religion and belief as well as emphasizing the need for respect for a diversity of religions and cultures.

The United Nations has a long record of defending freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental human right and a foundation for peace and justice. First stated by the global community in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this right was given the force of international law by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In 1981 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

In addition, the many interreligious and intercultural initiatives and activities that religious communities, interreligious organizations, humanists and other civil society organizations have been conducting in an organized manner now for over a century need to be acknowledged and lessons learned from this rich history. While the amount of organized intercultural and interreligious activities has continued to increase through the last century, this has not been able to

significantly diminish or stop violence and discrimination taking place as a result of misuse of religious sentiments and loyalties.

Social, economic, environmental, and territorial issues are often the underlying reasons for conflicts and tensions, which are then aggravated and exploited by extremists manipulating the loyalties and grievances of diverse cultural, ethnic or religious groups. The UN system and its agencies, as well as other multilateral institutions and regional bodies, are addressing now this complex set of challenges and are seeking ways forward, in order to find policies, structures and programmes that can acknowledge and respond to the multiple causes as well as the interdependencies of the current crises we are facing concerning the above outlined issues.

Objectives:

The High-Level Dialogue and its informal Interactive Hearing aim to strengthen efforts of interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation by engaging a variety of actors and constituencies, especially in government, civil society and the United Nations system. These three parties have also been at the core of the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace formed after the 2005 Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace. The High-level Dialogue further seeks to promote a culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations, advance multi-stakeholder coalitions, including with the private sector on related issues, further strengthen the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, and translate shared values into action in order to achieve sustainable peace in the 21st Century.

These objectives are also built on a diverse series of activities and initiatives undertaken by religious NGOs, interreligious organizations and various UN agencies especially over the last two decades. The most widely publicized UN initiatives include, inter alia, the UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001), the UNFPA *Culture Matters* (2004) and the Report of the *Alliance of Civilizations* (2006). Another notable resource is the *Final Document of the International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation with Freedom of Religion or Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination* of the Madrid Conference (2001).

Similarly, the General Assembly held on 10 and 11 May 2007 an informal Thematic Debate on 'Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: obstacles and opportunities' to explore the reasons behind the growing level of mistrust between people of different religions and cultures; and to examine how and why cultural and religious differences increasingly fuel, and are used to justify, conflicts.

As a means of stimulating discussion during the Interactive Civil Society Hearing on the afternoon of 4 October 2007 toward the achievement of the above-mentioned objectives, the following guiding questions are offered for consideration:

Questions for the 1st Panel, "Challenges of Interreligious & Intercultural Cooperation Today"

- Who are the 'main actors' of interreligious and intercultural cooperation across all sectors (civil society, government, UN) today? What does it mean to be a 'main actor'?
- What are the current modalities of interreligious and intercultural cooperation? How has it changed markedly from the past since the onset of globalization? How can we characterize regional differences?
- What are the most pressing current issues and greatest barriers to successful interreligious and intercultural cooperation that the 'main actors' face today?
- What are the relations between culture & religion? Is there a widely accepted relation or does it depend on context, historical and local differences?

Questions for the 2nd Panel, "Best Practices & Strategies for Interreligious & Intercultural Cooperation Going Forward"

- What are some examples of successful interreligious and intercultural cooperation today, locally, regionally, globally? What elements/aspects of these examples can be applied to other contexts, regions, faiths, ethical traditions?
- How can the 'main actors' strengthen interreligious and intercultural cooperation in the future (i.e. what modalities, processes and institutional arrangements can be found)?
- How can the interaction between the 'main actors', programmes, and initiatives for interreligious and intercultural cooperation in the UN system context be better coordinated, enabling more cohesion and synergies (for example, as called for in A/RES/61/221)?

Outcomes:

The desired outcomes of the High-Level Dialogue and its informal Interactive Hearing are not only to build upon, but also to develop further the outcomes of key conferences and initiatives mentioned in General Assembly resolution A/61/221 and under the 'Objectives' section of this concept note. While some outcome proposals (see some selected examples below) made at earlier conferences have already been implemented, much work yet remains to widen and strengthen the network of participating actors, to more effectively institutionalize their work with and through the UN, to significantly raise the level of political support and resources committed, and to dramatically increase the number and quality of ground-level implementation projects underway.

For example, following the conclusion of the 2005 Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace held at UN headquarters, the outcome on strategies to enhance interfaith cooperation towards peace was transmitted to the President of the 59th Session of the General Assembly as input to the High Level Plenary Meeting in September 2005. In the search for cohesion, cooperation and further

development, building on past conferences as well as other like minded initiatives, it is helpful to recall some of the then (2005) intended outcomes:

- An expansion and deepening of the relationship between the United Nations and civil society, including religious nongovernmental organizations;
- Practical actions in the fields of education and the media in order to foster understanding, tolerance and cooperation between peoples of different religions and beliefs so as to overcome intolerance and combat stereotypes and misperceptions, with particular reference to the Programme of Action under the Global Agenda for the Dialogue Among Civilizations (2001);
- The formation of an open-ended tripartite group composed of representatives from Member States, the United Nations system, and non-governmental organizations to follow these issues through mechanisms already available in the United Nations system but also by identifying new ways to address interreligious, intercultural and intercivilizational issues and concerns, including the opportunity and mechanism for religious leaders to speak, interact and respond more clearly and quickly in times of violence, crises and conflict;
- An invitation to the Secretary-General to explore enhancing implementation mechanisms and to follow up on the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace and the Global Agenda for Dialogue Among Civilizations of 2001 adopted by the General Assembly and other initiatives on dialogue among cultures and civilizations.

Since then (2005) the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and the Alliance of Civilizations have been launched, both building on years of preparatory work and their own distinct origins.

UN agencies have continued to engage with intercultural and interreligious issues, for example UNESCO in its intercultural and interreligious programmes, UNFPA in seeking culturally sensitive approaches and UNICEF in working together with religious communities on a wide range of programmes for children.

The initiatives and organizations mentioned here in the concept note, as well as other like minded organizations working locally, regionally and globally, continue in their efforts to implement their respective strategies and recommendations. Participants in this Interactive Hearing are encouraged to bring in their expertise, ideas and best practices to advance interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation everywhere in the world and to strengthen the outreach to support this cause.

Further and more detailed information on selected major conferences, initiatives and reference documents can be found on the web site of the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace:

<http://www.un.org/ga/president/61/follow-up/hld-interreligious.shtml>