

# RELIGION, DEVELOPMENT AND THE UNITED NATIONS



*"I HAVE LONG BELIEVED THAT WHEN  
GOVERNMENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY WORK TOWARD  
A COMMON GOAL, TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE IS  
POSSIBLE. FAITHS AND RELIGIONS ARE A CENTRAL  
PART OF THAT EQUATION."*

*— BAN KI-MOON, SECRETARY-GENERAL, UNITED  
NATIONS*

A REPORT OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL  
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## PREFACE

In 2011, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the Interfaith Center of New York (ICNY) convened a series of consultations that brought together representatives of various agencies of the United Nations, leaders of faith-based non-governmental organizations, and academic researchers working in a number of different disciplines. Initially prompted by the publication of a set of reflections on “Religion and the United Nations,”<sup>1</sup> each of these gatherings sought to open a space for additional reflection and critical dialogue on religion, peacebuilding, development, gender, and a range of related issues. The following report summarizes the key questions the consultations were designed to address, the central outcomes of these exploratory discussions, and select recommendations for those working in the field.

These consultations built on and extended work already being undertaken by the three convening organizations. With support from the Henry Luce Foundation, the Social Science Research Council’s ongoing project on religion and international affairs has worked to build stronger and more meaningful connections among an interdisciplinary network of scholars engaged in the study of religion in global perspective and to forge new linkages among scholars of religion and a range of actors committed to the rethinking of religion as a vital, complex, and controversial aspect of international affairs.

As a secular nonprofit organization, the Interfaith Center of New York seeks to make New York City and the world safe for religious difference by increasing respect and mutual understanding among people of different faith, ethnic, and cultural traditions and by fostering cooperation among religious communities and civic organizations to solve common social problems. ICNY’s International and UN Affairs department works to forge partnerships with international leaders and communities to integrate the spiritual, ethical, and moral aspects of religion in international peacemaking.

Finally, since 2001, the United Nations Population Fund has undertaken sustained research and advocacy efforts to assess how religion and cultural diversity matter for its core focus areas, which include reproductive health, gender equality, youth equity, and population dynamics. As part of that research, UNFPA surveyed its engagements with a range of religious actors and produced, in 2007, one of the UN’s first overviews of engagements with what have come to be known as faith-based organizations (FBOs). In 2008, in concert with many of its partners, UNFPA launched the Global Interfaith Network for Population and Development and catalyzed the establishment of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging FBOs for the Millennium Development Goals, which seeks to enhance information sharing and coordination across UN agencies that partner with FBOs and contend with issues of faith and development.

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<sup>1</sup> Azza Karam and Matthew Weiner, eds., “Religion and the United Nations,” Special Issue, *CrossCurrents* 60, no. 3 (2010).



UNFPA's work in this area has dovetailed with an increasing recognition of the importance of FBOs as actors at various levels within the world of international development. A 2008 World Health Organization study, for example, found that in sub-Saharan Africa, faith-based groups provide roughly 40 percent of the health-care infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> The role of such groups expands significantly in the context of conflict and humanitarian emergencies. In addition to providing basic, often life-saving services, FBOs frequently have close ties to religious leaders and are able to effectively mobilize and partner with local communities. By extension, FBOs have the capacity to influence community perceptions and to shape the transmission of necessary knowledge on a range of core development concerns, including HIV/AIDS, violence against women, and maternal and child health.

UNFPA's work in catalyzing greater and more productive engagement with a wide range of faith-based, faith-inspired, or otherwise religiously affiliated non-governmental organizations has been notable, and in multiple respects the consultations described here have sought to extend that work in order to take in an even wider range of interlocutors and collaborative partners. We are particularly grateful, then, to Dr. Azza Karam—who has played a key role at UNFPA and in the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging FBOs—for her leadership in overseeing the production and editing of this report. Our gatherings also benefitted immensely from the efforts of Thu Cao, Nadiya Kostyuk, and Helen Stawski at UNFPA, from the work of Jessica Polebaum and Wei Zhu at the SSRC, and from the participation and wise counsel of Chloe Breyer and Matthew Weiner of ICNY. Joseph Blankholm, Justin Reynolds, and Wei Zhu compiled, contributed to, and edited various stages of reporting around the consultations. Both the Henry Luce Foundation and the United Nations Population Fund generously provided support for the convening of the consultations and the production of this report. Finally, we owe a special thanks to all who participated in the consultations themselves. This report is in many ways preliminary, and we look forward to continuing the conversations.

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Social Science Research Council

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<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization, *Building from Common Foundations: The World Health Organization and Faith-Based Organizations in Primary Healthcare*, accessed June 6, 2012, [http://www.ccih.org/bulletin/0608files/BuildingFromCommonFoundations\\_WHO\\_and\\_FBOs.pdf](http://www.ccih.org/bulletin/0608files/BuildingFromCommonFoundations_WHO_and_FBOs.pdf).

The United Nations came into being at a time of intense global changes over sixty years ago. Since then it has grown in size, importance, impact, and relevance.

As a multilateral organization with national, regional, and international institutional outreach, the UN has a reach on a unique scale.

As a multilateral organization that has massive human power—including those engaged within it as its own staff and affiliated with it in myriad capacities, undertaking peacekeeping operations in its name, among many other forms—with mandates extending to every aspect of life and to the development, rights, peace, and security thereof, the UN is an amazing entity.

And as a multilateral organization that has extended its influence and infrastructure to encompass a huge range of mechanisms serving governments in almost two hundred countries and that convenes, develops, deploys, plans, and coordinates critical international conventions and interventions responding to human needs, the UN is unparalleled.

But the realities around the UN have changed, from a world in which nation-states made decisions to govern every aspect within their own boundaries and organized their own armies to a world where non-state actors, various peoples, and other multistate bodies proliferate.

Geopolitical alliances, governance regimes, and the direction of international development aid are all shifting. The very air we breathe and the environment around us, including plants and animals, are facing drastic changes.

One of the many changes becoming increasingly difficult to ignore, especially for long-standing secular organizations, is the extent to which religion is resurfacing as a critical broker of human and governmental existence. This appears, at first sight, to be contradictory to the secular ethos of the United Nations system and its human rights mandate.

But this assessment is not accurate. It must not be forgotten that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is itself predicated on the very values common to every faith tradition, and as such it is not an instrument without faith but rather a reflection of the world's common faiths.

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<sup>3</sup> This section was written by Azza Karam. None of the opinions expressed here necessarily represent those of any institution, board, or staff persons.

## WHY SHOULD THE UN REACH OUT TO FAITH COMMUNITIES?

The reality is that religion has not retreated to the private sphere, as anticipated by myriad modernist and secular theories. In fragile and post-conflict states, religious groups are often leading advocates for peace and reconciliation. Faith-based provision of basic services positions FBOs as important partners in policy dialogues on national resource distribution. In fact, from the perspective of faith communities, it is the UN that is the newcomer to development. While many religions have been engaged in social welfare for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, the UN is less than a century old.

Apart from the range of critical—often life-saving—social services provided by faith-based organizations, religious communities are also capable of unparalleled social mobilization. They often boast unparalleled worldwide convening capacities and are also owners of the longest-standing mechanisms for raising financial resources. In times in which traditional secular development is confronting its strongest set of resource challenges, these capabilities cannot be underestimated. Given the realities of service provision, resource mobilization, and political presence, it becomes clear that being knowledgeable of the work of FBOs is necessary if we are to take seriously the fundamental dimensions of social development and social capital as we consider the imperatives of future development agendas.

Thus an informed and systematic outreach to key partners in the world of religion—which, it must be unequivocally stated, is bigger and much more complicated than the world of secular international development and where community service provision has already been a reality for centuries—is essential.

## GLIMPSES OF UNFPA-FBO ENGAGEMENT

Given UNFPA's mandate, grounded in the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (1994) and the dimension therein on sexual and reproductive health, the organization engages with issues of culture on an almost daily basis. In addition to UNFPA's commitment to human rights—mirroring that of the entire United Nations system—UNFPA's leadership has consistently proposed that to realize fundamental human rights, sustainable behavioral change must find support from within a given culture. To promote human rights requires knowledge of and fluency in the cultural contexts at play.

UNFPA's mandate, especially since 2000,<sup>4</sup> therefore includes a strong emphasis on the importance of the tripartite foundation of development programming: cultural sensitivity, gender equality, and human rights. There has also been a realization within UNFPA that cultural agents of change in most societies

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<sup>4</sup> In 2000, then new UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Thoraya A. Obaid began to strongly champion the cause of culture and development, which continued throughout her tenure. Her advocacy was instrumental to UNFPA's adoption of a systematic and studied approach to engaging with faith-based organizations working in the areas of reproductive health.

include religious actors: local faith communities, faith-based service-delivery non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or FBOs, and religious leaders.

Thus, beginning in 2001, UNFPA undertook a sustained research initiative to assess how culture matters in the regions in which the agency works. By taking stock of UNFPA Country Offices' engagements with religious communities—including details concerning these communities and the issues around which partnerships were formed—UNFPA mapped its entire engagement with FBOs and found that at least 75 of 112 Country Offices had partnered with FBOs and religious leaders on a range of programs. The experiences of the Country Offices provided rich insights on the value of such partnerships, particularly the role of faith-based interlocutors in the messaging and advocacy necessary for work on sexual and reproductive health, as well as the significance of their service delivery outreach in sustaining national capacities for health-care provision.

In 2008 UNFPA convened many of these FBO partners to launch a unique human rights-oriented network within the United Nations: the Global Interfaith Network for Population and Development. Today there are over five hundred FBOs in the network, most with a legacy of partnering with UNFPA and several UN sister agencies on a range of development issues. In addition to organizing the Interfaith Network, in 2009 UNFPA published *Guidelines for Engaging Faith-Based Organizations as Cultural Agents of Change*, intended for its own staff in all Country Offices but made available to other UN staff.<sup>5</sup> The guidelines provide the principles underpinning partnerships with religious communities, offer an understanding of whom these interlocutors are or should be, and elucidate a means of facilitating the best outcomes of such partnerships for the fulfillment of UNFPA's mandate.

## LESSONS FROM A UN SYSTEMWIDE JOURNEY TO FBO ENGAGEMENT

UNFPA has played an active role in convening and coordinating sister UN agencies and various offices and divisions within the United Nations system to form an Inter-Agency Task Force on FBOs and the MDGs. This Task Force serves as a platform for sharing knowledge and experiences of engaging FBOs in the various mandate areas, facilitating coordination among similarly oriented initiatives where possible, and supporting information sharing about and with FBO partners. In so doing, it acts as an internal capacity-building and knowledge-management mechanism for the United Nations system. UNAIDS, UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNDESA, WHO, ILO, and UNFPA are some of the major organizations with formal representation in the Inter-Agency Task Force, together with Habitat, UNEP, and others. The work of the task force has illuminated four major lessons, detailed below.

First, FBOs and religion are not one and the same, although they may be intrinsically linked. FBOs are practical, organizational expressions of religious values and thus vary greatly in scale, motivation,

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations Population Fund, *Guidelines for Engaging Faith-Based Organizations as Cultural Agents of Change*, accessed June 6, 2012, [http://www.unfpa.org/culture/docs/Fbo\\_engagement.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/culture/docs/Fbo_engagement.pdf).



accountability, religious engagement, and worldview.<sup>6</sup> Differences between local and global FBOs are also vast and often not systematically taken into account. Some would argue that owing to the professionalization of development, many international FBOs share much in common with secular NGOs (e.g., organizational structures). Yet the world of religion is vast and difficult to quantify or categorize into neatly distinct entities. Religion and faith do not lend themselves to the usual normative frameworks of development praxis. This means that development actors in a UN context must be learned, strategic, and delivery oriented in determining, managing, and evaluating FBO partnerships.

Second, instead of reinventing the wheel as per the new development fashion, engagement with religious communities has to be sustained, be built on existing knowledge and practice, and form part of broader civil society and government partnerships. This is critical to forging the trust required for such engagement. Additionally, this approach facilitates ownership of national development processes by all strategic partners.

Third, the United Nations cannot, and should not, work with only one faith tradition, nor only one FBO, nor the same group of religious leaders on all issues. The UN is obliged to work with all faiths, several FBOs, and varied religious representatives on a multiplicity of human development needs. Furthermore, the UN must pursue its FBO partnerships with its customary manner of mutual respect and appreciation for respective partners' strengths and modus operandi, as long as there is agreement on the goals of human development: human rights, peace, and security of all peoples.

Fourth, the responsibility for forging learned, strategic, and sustained partnerships that help realize human rights lies on all sides. In the same manner in which UN agencies are held accountable to intergovernmental boards, mandates, and civil society partners, the UN in turn expects its FBO partners to do the same internally and in their relationship with it.

Some of these lessons have resulted in interesting trends: some in the UN argue that religion is too contentious and should not be involved in public life; others join those now running to embrace what has become a new fashion, with little study of the impact involved.

Both trends represent challenges. Agencies need to enhance, strengthen, and support the human rights-based culture of the UN. To do so, sensitivity to the impact of religion on all aspects of life needs to be applied diligently, studiedly, and systematically. This does not demand an apologist approach to abuses of human rights. On the contrary, it entails broadening arguments for human rights to encompass conceptions of dignity and well-being that are present within every faith tradition.

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<sup>6</sup> There is an ongoing debate—and to date little unanimity—about how to define FBOs. In the meantime different UN organizations and development partners (e.g., USAID, UNFPA, and UNICEF) use respective working definitions.

## THE CONFLUENCE OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

Ten to twenty years ago, many scholars and politicians deemed the confluence of religion and mainstream political activism to exhibit, at best, a “lack of awareness of secular realities.” Today, religion and politics are included in many university courses, not to mention in the titles of plenty of books and other publications. Study of religion and politics, the sacred and the political, and several other variations of the same theme is definitely “in.” And for good reason: with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union came a near eclipse of the grand political metanarratives of communism and socialism.

Standing as the supposedly sole victor, liberalism eventually found itself stranded on the murkier shores of globalization and significantly undermined by the global financial crisis. The global landscape is further awash with problematic political regimes, serious global economic disparities, debilitating environmental effects of global warming, armed civil conflicts, transnational acts of terrorism, and the fear of terrorist access to nuclear weapons.

When considering the relationship between religion and the UN, it is important to consider the many UN staff lives that have been lost to targeted killings undertaken by terrorist groups in the name of religion.<sup>7</sup> Some radical groups still consider the UN an enemy. So the confluence of religion and politics is not just a theoretical concern but one that has already cost the UN human lives as well as other resources. Religion and politics are strongly linked to the security of UN staff and those they serve, and the implications of maintaining safety in terms of physical costs and related logistics are not minor.

Where religious-political activism is characterized by the values of human rights, it is a powerful resource for the UN, as religious leaders and institutions are often highly respected by governments in the global South. At times, however, religious activism may be inspired by absolutist values dissonant with those of the UN. Where absolutism in any form prevails, the potential for discord abounds. Given the professed importance for diverse development actors to seek common action for common challenges, it behooves both the UN and FBO actors to accept the different strengths each may have and to forge partnerships based on a level playing field where neither side is superior to the other. Some secular development partners, who see the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in almost sacred terms, can perceive this parity as a risk.

But it may be an even bigger risk to ignore the need for a new form of development practice that can address the multiple challenges confronted today: a world order in transition, a financial system in obvious disarray, and a climate the protective layers of which are, literally, disintegrating. The old ways of addressing the needs of human development are simply insufficient.

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<sup>7</sup> This is especially evident in the bombings of UN buildings in Baghdad (2003), Algiers (2007), and Kabul (2009).

## THE BUSINESS OF DEVELOPMENT ELITES WITH RELIGIOUS OVERTONES

The emergence of some FBO-run programs, specifically around the partnership interests and resources made available by the UN and the donor communities, will potentially mirror what took place in the relatively secular NGO movement over fifty years ago. While global civil society institutions have seen seminal and unprecedented strides since then, outreach to NGOs worldwide has nevertheless experienced some challenges.

One such challenge is a result of systematic outreach to a single group of NGOs, no matter the area of engagement, some of which maintain a questionable track record of management and delivery. The consequence of this approach is the creation of a global elite of development NGOs, some of which have clearly found this a lucrative business and may even have become distanced, in credibility and legitimacy, from the communities they purport to serve. In addition, consequences in terms of increased suspicion of development assistance by some governments and other civil society organizations alike are still hampering development processes. International development practitioners need to be especially alert to the potential pitfalls of market-oriented non-governmental entities—including those that come cloaked in the garb of religion or use religious discourse.

The potentially myopic practice of identifying a handful of FBOs as partners to diverse UN bodies on every endeavor related to religion should be discouraged. The world of religion is too vast, and the world of FBOs (from international to regional, national, community, and village levels) is too complex and rich to be reduced to a few “comfortable” entry points. On the other hand, overly engaging religious leaders at the expense of those actually serving their communities on a whole range of issues is also problematic. One official representative of a religious institution cannot be a spokesperson for the needs of an entire community of believers—especially not on contentious issues.

Moreover, as recent developments bear witness, religious institutions and their leadership face seminal changes to their authority and legitimacy. These developments should encourage international development practitioners in general, and the UN in particular, to be cautious as to exclusively engaging with religious leaders. At the same time, focusing only on service providers, without assessing the perspectives and insights of religious institutions and their leadership, can be compromising. A greater appreciation of the multiple ways FBOs relate to religious leadership will help to clarify potential entry points and collaborative partnerships.

What is required is a balanced outreach to communities of faith, predicated on common principles and constantly double-checked by a proven track record in delivering on services, shared commitments, and promises. The standards of delivery cannot be uniform across the UN system except in one area: human rights, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While many FBOs practice the principles of human rights without necessarily using the language, some have at times have appeared to contravene or condone practices that are violations of human rights. Where and when this happens, the

United Nations and other human rights-based entities are obligated to unequivocally defend the human rights mandate.

Whereas the failure of a few NGOs and individuals to represent and deliver informs an ongoing sense of caution about engaging with them, it would be, at best, highly problematic if a similar failure to deliver came to be seen as somehow linked to one particular faith or another. In the context of the interlinkage between religion and politics, this form of negative perception or association could have serious consequences. This is therefore a danger confronting international development that is too easily used to dismiss or distance development bodies from religions, but which should nevertheless not be underestimated.

#### INCREASING OR DIVERTING INVESTMENTS? AND WHAT ABOUT WOMEN'S RIGHTS?

There is another very real concern that several secular partners of the United Nations reiterate—namely, now that the UN seems to acknowledge the value of increasing partnerships with FBOs and is doing so, does this mean fewer resources for secular NGOs? This concern is particularly—though by no means only—articulated in women's rights circles and mirrors a broader fear.

Many of the traditional partners of the UN system since the first women's conference in Mexico City in 1975 come from secular human rights organizations, especially women's rights NGOs. Largely thanks to the efforts of these organizations and the fruits of their partnerships, the inclusion of NGOs in UN forums gradually became a norm. Many of these secular and feminist NGOs had a long and difficult history of struggle with mainstream religious spokespersons and institutions, which still find it difficult to accept an equal rights discourse.

So it should not come as a surprise that many of the UN's women's rights partners are now wondering whether a newfound appreciation of religion may come at the expense of their own access to badly needed resources, and worse, whether it may even translate to the UN adopting some of the conservative positions of certain religious hierarchies. Herein, again, lies the importance of adherence to the precepts and actions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

These concerns need to be tackled head-on and not left to fester. The UN itself, under the leadership of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, continues to provide examples of why an acceptance of the importance of religious actors does not come at the expense of any human rights, and certainly not women's rights. There are several strong indicators of the commitment of the UN system—especially under its current leadership—to women's rights and gender equality:

- There are more women senior managers heading UN bodies today than ever in the history of the institution. These women, from different parts of the world and varied walks of life, come with distinguished records of service for human rights, and in some cases a complementing record of activism.



- In January 2011 the United Nations Entity for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality proudly came into being. Women's NGOs strongly advocated for this new entity for over eight years, and its establishment is seen as a confirmation of the UN system's commitment to gender equality and women's rights.
- On International Women's Day (March 8) in 2012, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon committed to extend the already strong representation of women in top UN echelons by strengthening the representation of women in UN middle management.

## HUMAN DEVELOPMENT OR PROSELYTIZATION?

There is a lingering concern about the tension between providing real and necessary services and the potential strings attached to specific religious dogma or proselytization. This is a real issue for many secular development practitioners, and the reasons go back in history to the pros and cons of missionary work and its subsequent linkages to colonialism. But these concerns are also linked to different tensions around rights, almost as though there were a juxtaposition between a religious organization's right to free speech and the right to food, water, shelter, or whatever service that organization is providing.

While that complex nexus merits more significant investigation, for now it seems that the needs far outweigh the concerns. In other words, the number of those rendered vulnerable through lack of access to basic needs, as a result of either natural or man-made inefficiencies, may far outweigh the number of those succumbing to conversion through services provided by religious organizations. And in the absence of reliable statistics on the number of forced converts after they were fed, clothed, and given shelter and refuge, it may behoove development practitioners to focus on mobilizing and leveraging as many resources as possible to satisfy the documented number of vulnerable people around the world. This is not meant to dismiss the concerns about "religious exploitation of vulnerabilities" in any way; it is rather to stress that these concerns should be addressed in a more studied fashion and not stand in the way of important partnerships needed to meet growing basic needs.

## EQUAL PARTNERS OR INSTRUMENTALIZED AGENTS?

Some religious leaders and FBOs have vocalized a fear of being used somewhat more openly than their UN partners. Representatives of the faith-based world have questioned why the UN and the larger international community have suddenly woken up to their importance. Some have even voiced their unease that this interest in religion may be another passing fad that seeks to capitalize on their strengths and even attempt to change their way of doing things, almost as if a covert attempt were at hand to secularize the religious.

But members of UN bodies are equally concerned that outreach to the religious world may be misperceived or abused, reflecting perhaps a fear of an attempt to religionize the secular. This mutual suspicion may not be surprising after so many years of sometimes tepid and often ad hoc

acknowledgment of one other. It is noteworthy that the UN agencies with the longest track record of successful results-based alliances with FBOs are less worried about issues of instrumentalization.

Sustained partnerships, with sharing of lessons learned and acknowledgment of mutual strengths and achievements, have created a sense of trust and respect on both sides. The formula of trial and error based on actual engagement around service delivery in the field, with a transparency of purpose, deference to respective *modus operandi*, and accountability to joint agreements, appears to be the only winning formula to arise thus far.

#### WHICH UN AND WHICH RELIGION?

Underlying this entire discussion is the issue of the vastness of the two worlds in question. As of February 2012, the total number of UN staff was over 37,000,<sup>8</sup> and the number of UN agencies, bodies, offices, and departments easily amounted to sixty, each with its own staff and many with headquarters and field offices. In short, the United Nations is a huge entity with multiple facets and a plethora of forms, acting on every conceivable aspect of human development. Many FBOs often either refer to this organism as though it were one homogenous entity or complain about the confusion engendered by so many bodies all being part of “the UN.” This is a very real concern because unless there is a deep knowledge of the system, which many in the UN themselves struggle to acquire, it can take a lifetime to understand whom exactly to reach out to, let alone partner with, and how best to do so.

Yet even with all this complexity, the UN remains relatively quantifiable and has one Charter. The same cannot be said of the world of faith, which makes the UN behemoth pale in comparison. It is no surprise, therefore, that when the UN needs to consider its potential outreach to the world of religions, it can be stumped. The number of religions in the world, let alone the range of official and unofficial spokespersons; statements; affiliated charitable groups; global, regional, national, and community-based organizations; holy books; and bodies of interpretation, both historical and contemporary, is staggering. In fact some would argue that it would be a challenge to attempt a comprehensive overview of all these dimensions, as they are constantly evolving. Rather than construct a directory of world faiths, what is needed is the ability to appreciate the myriad ways in which faith—as part of the culture, gender relations, and power dynamics in any society—should inform the design, implementation, and assessment of any development intervention.

This is already happening in multiple ways, as the track record of partnerships established between various elements of the two worlds demonstrates—a feat that cannot be underestimated. But successes do still point to yet another, ongoing challenge.

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<sup>8</sup> This figure includes staff in “the UN Secretariat and special status units ... holding appointments of one year or more. ... Of that total, 14,823 paid from various sources of funding are assigned to the Secretariat and 22,375 are assigned to other entities of the United Nations.” In “Composition of the Secretariat: Report of the Secretary-General,” UN document A/59/299, August 26, 2004, paragraph 11. Clearly this figure does not take into account staff on shorter-term contracts or Peacekeeping Forces. Hence, at best, this is a rather conservative estimate.

*I have long believed that when governments and civil society work toward a common goal, transformational change is possible. Faiths and religions are a central part of that equation.*  
—Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General, United Nations

The UN's positive history of working with governments and civil society helps it to create a safe space for varied forms of faith-based service providers and religious spokespersons to engage one another in the interest of development. Support for such forms of multi-religious cooperation could simultaneously enable the UN to play an instrumental role in gauging the legitimacy and credibility of those religious voices and endeavors that are calling for social cohesion and multi-religious coexistence.

An important lesson learned over the years of seeking partnerships *within the United Nations* around issues of faith, religion, and faith-based outreach is that there can be no one way for the UN to see the world of religion, and thus no one model, or method, of engagement. In fact attempts to systematize the engagement across the entire UN system may well be unrealistic. Instead UN agencies and bodies must work together, with the advice and participation of key FBO partners, to exchange knowledge, document partnerships, assess the range and outcomes of such partnerships, and monitor, evaluate, and build on successes. These are critical to an informed approach to mitigate and manage real and potential challenges.

It is also important to realize that the most significant strengths of these forms of partnership lie in their ability to affect the culture of development itself (i.e., the way development is done) as well as the attitudes and behaviors of development practitioners, whether secular, faith based, or a mix of the two. The largely rhetorical question here is whether such change can be monitored and evaluated as per the traditional development indicators. Where partnerships revolve around delivering humanitarian needs, the traditional quantitative indicators used by most service providers would be feasible. But what of partnerships that are targeted toward attitudinal and behavioral change? Clearly these call for more qualitative assessment strategies, which will have implications for how programs are designed and implemented from the outset.

In reflecting on the secular UN culture of development itself, in which the tendency is too frequently to view religion as a challenge, we now know that there is another way to see things—a way that involves appreciation, celebration, acknowledgment, recognition, and affirmation; in other words, a positive way to do development work to which faith traditions—familiar with such terms—can contribute.

Amartya Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize for Economics, set in motion a paradigmatic shift by which development expanded from an endeavor exclusively concerned with hard-core economics to one encompassing the domains of identity and behavior, and thereby speaking of social capital.

Where and when faith both forms and informs values and praxis, *especially those that facilitate and catalyze the acquisition of human rights*, it becomes part of social capital. When UN development

processes engage with religious representatives to enhance advocacy and build national capacities that realize the range of human rights (whether social, economic, civil, cultural, or political), this is a form of investment in social capital.

Such investments have long-term—and often difficult to quantify—returns, which can also be nonlinear. Indeed, many a setback can be anticipated (the confluence of religion and politics mentioned above may occasion its own challenges for governments, societies, and economies). Yet whatever the outcomes, this form of investment in social capital, which is dependent on relationships and issues that touch the very core of our humanity, has often received little systematic attention in international development praxis.

These relationships contribute to the evolution of human development paradigms generally and to the *culture of development* specifically. It is for this reason that the shared reflection and deliberation forums bringing together those in the UN system, those in the world of faith-inspired development practice, and those studying religion and world affairs were convened.



## SHARED DELIBERATIONS: CONVENING THE CONSULTATIONS

Bringing together scholars of religion and representatives of the UN and faith-based organizations to discuss issues of common concern is not a minor achievement. Just fifteen years ago, there was very little discussion around the importance of FBOs for international development, and it was rare to see any sustained dialogue around these issues under the auspices of the United Nations. Spurred by the cultural contentions around the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, the UN was only just beginning to consider the significance of religion in a more systematic fashion at that time.

While UNFPA has led the way on UN engagement with FBOs, much work remains around the need for systematization and informed approaches within the UN system as a whole. These consultations have laid the groundwork for broader engagement among scholars of religion, various UN agencies, and FBOs and religious leaders. By demarcating the challenges and opportunities facing present and future partnerships between the UN and FBOs, these consultations have also focused on constructive means to address differences in opinions and approaches.

Each of the three consultations centered on a general question and brought together leading scholars and partners from various UN agencies and FBOs. What follows is a brief summary of each consultation, including their respective themes, guiding questions, and panel speakers.

### FEBRUARY 11, 2011: SSRC HEADQUARTERS DYNAMICS OF DEVELOPMENT AND PEACEBUILDING

*How can the UN enhance partnerships with FBOs?*

Discussion during the first consultation centered on the nature of the UN's engagement with religion. While the participants broadly agreed on the need for more systematic and learned collaboration between FBOs and the UN, questions remained as to how these institutions ought to collaborate. For instance, some participants suggested that the UN should create a "Spiritual Council," and others worried that this would create a harmful distinction between believer and nonbeliever. Some participants also wondered if the UN should have an instrumental relationship with FBOs, or whether it should approach them as equal partners—even if this means establishing them as long-term global development actors.

More than thirty guests attended this panel session, including leading scholars of international affairs and religion, as well as representatives from a number of UN agencies and various FBOs. Moderated by Azza Karam, a senior advisor to UNFPA, the panel featured discussants Mark Scheuer (Director of the UN Alliance of Civilizations), Jean Duff (Senior Advisor for Strategy and Resources at the Center for Interfaith Action), and Leslie Vinjamuri (Co-Director of the Centre for the International Politics of Conflict, Rights and Justice).

APRIL 26, 2011: UNFPA HEADQUARTERS (CO-SPONSORED WITH UNAOC)  
DYNAMICS OF GENDER AND PEACEBUILDING

*What are the unique roles of women, and in particular religious women, in conflict settings and peacemaking efforts?*

The second consultation addressed similar questions to those raised in the first consultation but did so through a different lens. Participants discussed the roles of women in peacebuilding and development and framed the conversation in terms of religion. Depending on the time and place, women might draw on religion's values and institutions to buttress peace and reconciliation efforts, or they might operate below or outside of religious structures since these can sometimes limit women more than enable them. Participants also discussed how religion both contributes to and prevents the violence against women that often attends war.

Roughly forty guests attended the panel session, including representatives from the academy, FBOs, and various UN agencies. Moderated by Jonathan VanAntwerpen, Program Director of the SSRC's Religion and the Public Sphere program, the panel featured discussants Anne Marie Goetz (UN Women), Katherine Marshall (Georgetown University), Cecile Mazzacurati (UNFPA), Jacqueline Moturi Ogega (Religions for Peace International), and Gay Rosenblum-Kumar (UN Development Programme).

SEPTEMBER 16, 2011: UNFPA HEADQUARTERS  
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

*What further research is needed on gender equality, FBOs, and the UN's engagement with religion, and what role should scholars play in these efforts?*

Participants at the third consultation sought to describe challenges to the UN's engagement with religion and to suggest practical and theoretical strategies for addressing them. Because FBOs control vast resources and in some regions provide the bulk of crucial infrastructure, collaboration has become increasingly important for effective development and peacebuilding efforts. In addition, religious leaders often play large roles in fragile states where development and peacebuilding work is most needed, making relationships between development actors and religious leaders all the more important for accomplishing goals that secular non-governmental organizations, FBOs, and local religious communities often share. Participants also reflected on the research needed going forward and the role the academy can play in facilitating engagement between secular and religious actors.

The third and final consultation was attended by roughly two dozen guests. The day's panels were moderated by Chloe Breyer (ICNY), Jonathan VanAntwerpen (SSRC), and Azza Karam (UNFPA) and featured interventions by Stephen Hanmer (UN Children's Fund), David Little (University of Virginia School of Law), Katherine Marshall (Georgetown University), Paul Mikov (World Vision International), and Thomas Uthup (UN Alliance of Civilizations).

## DISCUSSION OUTCOMES

The consultation discussions were rich, often passionate, and always engaging. This section outlines some key points elucidated by the three encounters.

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

During the consultations, participants identified a number of challenges for the UN's engagement with FBOs and religious leaders. Three themes emerged in these discussions:

1. *Building Partnerships*: How can the UN and FBOs build productive partnerships that accomplish shared development goals? And how can existing partnerships be strengthened?
2. *Women, Religion, and Development*: What roles do religious women play in development and peacebuilding? How can the UN and FBOs establish a shared understanding of these roles while promoting gender equality and maintaining the language of human rights?
3. *Academic Research*: What research is needed to build and strengthen partnerships between the UN and FBOs? What role can the academy play in those partnerships?

The following section assesses these specific challenges and frames them alongside the potential solutions and new opportunities proposed by participants during the consultations.

## BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN UN AGENCIES AND FBOS

Assessing partnerships between UN Agencies and FBOs was one of the primary goals of the consultations. The kind of challenges underlying such partnerships had been addressed before by UN staff at the UN Inter-Agency Consultation on FBO Engagement, held at UNFPA headquarters on July 9, 2008.<sup>9</sup> During those proceedings, UN agency representatives noted the following challenges:

- Unease in engaging religion within the United Nations system
- Awareness and assessment of the multiplicity of initiatives
- Formulation and systemization of guidelines for FBO engagement
- Engagement with FBOs and religious leaders on the political level
- Resistance to engagement with the United Nations from within faith-based communities
- Representativeness of the FBOs engaged, including engagement with women in religious leader positions and women-oriented FBOs

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<sup>9</sup> See United Nations Population Fund, *Proceedings Report: United Nations Inter-Agency Consultation on Engagement with Faith-Based Organizations*, accessed June 6, 2012, [http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2008/proceedings\\_fbo.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2008/proceedings_fbo.pdf).

Building on the work already accomplished, participants in the SSRC-sponsored consultations identified six additional challenges to the UN's engagement with FBOs:

- Choosing the right language to describe FBOs, religious leaders, and religion
- Addressing structural differences between the UN and many FBOs and faith-based communities
- Working only with FBOs that meet the UN's formal requirements for accreditation, thereby excluding those that are not accredited
- Deciding whether the UN should instrumentalize FBOs or approach them as equal partners in collaboration
- Establishing a shared language and set of values that is grounded in human rights and consonant with the UN's Charter
- Working with FBOs and religious leaders in fragile states, where religious institutions and leaders might compete for power with precarious state authorities

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#### TALKING ABOUT FAITH AND RELIGION: CHOOSING WORDS CAREFULLY

Several participants in the consultations suggested that the language used to describe the UN's partnerships with FBOs requires sensitivity. For instance, because of the increasing importance of FBOs as development actors, some in the development community have begun to speak of a "faith sector." This designation poses problems, however, because it creates a misleading dichotomy between secular and religious actors, asserting a strong difference between them even though in some cases those differences might be small. Identifying a single "faith sector" also elides significant differences among religious actors by grouping progressive, human rights-oriented organizations with organizations that might be opposed to the values expressed in the UN Charter. Creating a UN "Spiritual Council" comprising FBOs and religious leaders would pose similar problems by reinforcing the divide between believers and nonbelievers and underemphasizing religious differences. Several participants argued against such a proposal.

Despite these challenges, speaking about a faith sector has proven useful for establishing the importance of FBOs and describing their nascent partnerships with the UN, secular NGOs, and governments. Ultimately participants agreed that, moving forward, more careful terminology is needed.

One scholar of religion attending the third consultation noted that academic conversations about religion have become increasingly self-reflexive and preoccupied with the word itself. Some academics have gone so far as to question the usefulness of the term at all, and others have sought to reach a rigorous, agreed-upon definition. Still others have argued for a pragmatic middle ground, namely, that while religion is a social construction, it is also quite powerful as a concept in the world and needs to be dealt with on its own terms as long as it remains in common parlance.



Other participants offered competing views on religion. For instance, one representative from a prominent FBO argued that religion describes something about human nature that is shared across all cultures. A similar voice argued that regardless of whether a person is secular or religious, everyone believes in something and has faith in his or her values. Another participant, representing the UN Alliance of Civilizations, argued that religion should be seen as a subset of culture, but that one should also be careful not to elide important differences within a dominant culture by overlooking internal religious and cultural heterogeneity.

Overall, participants were less wary of discussing “religion” than they were the “faith sector,” and all present continued to find religion useful as a descriptor. It was widely agreed that questions concerning the category of religion as such are an area for further academic inquiry. Participants also felt that development practitioners ought to be flexible in their definitions of religion and emphasize similarity across traditions rather than differences.

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#### ASYMMETRICAL STRUCTURES OF THE UN AND FAITH-BASED COMMUNITIES

The structures of FBOs and faith-based communities can vary greatly, and not all these structures lend themselves to engagement with the UN. Diverse faiths and faith traditions with complex and multipolar systems of authority might not be adequately represented in a UN body. Highly localized faith-based communities with loose ties to larger organizational structures pose especially difficult challenges to building partnerships. The localized structures of some faith-based communities are constitutive of their respective religious cultures, as evidenced by Protestant Christian traditions named for their particular form of governance (e.g., Presbyterians and Congregationalists).

Faith-based communities that are particularly localized in their structure and leadership would be difficult for the UN to engage because they are not fully embedded within larger organizational structures that span local communities and tie them together, that is, because they are not structured like the UN’s typical NGO partners. The structure of UN agencies and the nature of their methods might also encourage them to engage with only the tops of religious hierarchies when pursuing partnerships. This top-down approach could provide disproportionate legitimacy to certain religious leaders as well as ignore the important but often less official roles that women play in faith-based communities.

Because partnering with localized religious leaders and FBOs can be difficult, the UN might miss opportunities to work with them and thereby forgo a major advantage of such religious groups: their strong ties at the grassroots level. Avoiding localized faith-based communities and FBOs also gives disproportionate representation to highly organized groups. This limited engagement skews how the UN understands and interacts with a given faith, and in the process it legitimizes only certain leaders in a faith-based community. If the UN were to systematically pursue partnerships with FBOs and faith-based communities, it might put pressure on highly localized FBOs and faith-based communities to restructure themselves to fit better with the UN’s modes of engagement.

Many participants agreed that UN staff should find creative ways of engaging faith-based development actors at the grassroots level as well as continue to seek partnerships with women working in FBOs and faith-based communities, regardless of their official leadership roles. Pragmatically, some of these challenges are difficult to avoid, and highly organized faith-based communities already engaged in large-scale development work bring much to the table when partnering with the UN.

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## FBOS AND THE UN ACCREDITATION PROCESS

The UN requires that all NGOs, including FBOs, be accredited either through the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) or through the Department of Public Information (DPI). NGOs in consultative status with the ECOSOC generally have more privileges to participate in intergovernmental meetings of the UN than those affiliated with DPI. Per ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31, the “aims and purposes” of all organizations entering into consultative status with the ECOSOC must “be in conformity with the spirit, purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.” Further, the UN requires that all NGOs “shall undertake to support the work of the [UN] and to promote knowledge of its principles and activities, in accordance with its own aims and purposes and the nature and scope of its competence and activities.”<sup>10</sup> NGOs must also be thoroughly established, showing that they have existed for at least two years, which they can prove by having registered with the appropriate governmental authorities. The UN’s formal process of accreditation thus limits the ways in which the UN can engage with FBOs and which FBOs can become affiliated with the UN.

Some consultation participants cautioned that by working only with accredited institutions, the UN might exclude many religious actors. Others argued that such accreditation is important and helps determine which FBOs share the UN’s values and would make strong partners in development efforts. Accreditation can be difficult for FBOs, especially in fragile states where unstable governments might undermine attempts to establish or verify formal governmental recognition. Some individual member states might not allow an FBO to become accredited owing to internal politics or religious tensions. In other circumstances, faith-based communities that engage in activities consistent with the UN’s development goals might not be structured in a way that allows them to be recognized for accreditation. In practice, the UN must weigh the benefits of formally vetting its FBO partnerships with the possibility of alienating potential contributors that cannot become accredited.

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## EQUAL COLLABORATORS?

Some consultation participants asked what attitude the UN should have when engaging FBOs and faith-based communities. Two approaches were identified:

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<sup>10</sup> ECOSOC, Resolution 1996/31, “Consultative Relationship between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations” July 25, 1996, <http://esa.un.org/coordination/ngo/new/index.asp?page=part1>.

1. Instrumental engagement: In pursuit of its human rights mandate and the MDGs, the UN should treat FBOs as assets. The UN should engage FBOs on projects oriented around specific development goals, with the achievement of those goals as the primary focus.
2. Equal collaboration and recognition: The UN should engage FBOs as permanent actors in the global order, constituting their own unique arena of civil society. The UN should understand FBOs' goals as intrinsically important alongside the goals of the UN, and any partnership should be equal.

Respondents to the challenge of deciphering the nature of the relationship between the UN and FBOs stressed that the United Nations is first and foremost an intergovernmental body that owes its existence and is accountable to its 192 member states. As such, the UN's primary decision maker is the collected body of world governments. This structure of governance gives primacy to the UN's overarching human rights mandate and dictates the ways in which the UN provides support to governments and civil society.

Some consultation participants suggested that the UN should focus on coordinating and facilitating FBO activities, rather than representing their constituencies. Per the requirements of ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31, the UN should seek to partner with FBOs whose missions are consistent with the UN's goals, thereby remaining consistent with its Charter, while aiding those FBOs in the fulfillment of their own respective missions.

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## ESTABLISHING SHARED LANGUAGE AND VALUES

Many consultation participants stressed the need to establish shared language and values across secular and faith-based communities, as secular and religious language can sometimes be incommensurable. Representatives from UN agencies in particular stressed the need for human rights-based language that is consistent with the UN's Charter and the MDGs and is articulated in such a way that it resonates across faith-based traditions. Some also emphasized the need to be actively inclusive of FBOs with progressive views on issues like women's rights and discrimination.

Recognizing that working toward common goals can encourage mutual understanding, several participants suggested that shared concerns, sometimes called "shared cares," could provide the basis of language and values that cut across secular and faith-based traditions. Identifying common development and peacebuilding goals is an important step in building shared language and values. By focusing on shared concerns like violence and poverty, FBOs and the UN can work together to pursue solutions. The challenge is to focus on similarities that bind rather than differences that divide. For instance, though the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child is suffused with religious values, many countries have ratified it.

Concerned about resistance from within the UN to engagement with FBOs, several participants agreed that nonreligious actors must become more comfortable with religious language. They also noted that many people of faith feel alienated by the language of rights and might be more comfortable with a language of dignity. Drawing on related conversations about the nature of religion, some participants suggested that a shared spiritual framework is necessary. One representative from UNICEF urged that trust, listening, and humility are the remedies for this discomfort and that both nonreligious and faith-based development actors need to adopt these attitudes when working in development.

Several participants suggested that the expert knowledge of academics could help to educate development actors on religious differences among and within religious traditions. Knowledge of these differences would facilitate conversations between secular and religious actors and help build a framework of shared language and values that would provide the basis of strong partnerships. One representative from a prominent FBO even suggested that the UN create a matrix of like properties of major religions that would allow them to easily identify shared concerns, such as MDG 1: the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. Participants noted that these consultations have helped to establish shared language and values by convening representatives from secular and faith-based communities.

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## FBOS IN FRAGILE STATES

Fragile states are some of the most important and the most precarious sites of UN engagement with FBOs. In fragile states, FBOs often provide a higher percentage of basic survival infrastructure than in more stable states, which can mean that religious leaders are unusually powerful actors in politics and development. Collaborating with these actors can bring high risks and high rewards, making UN partnerships with FBOs and faith-based communities all the more crucial.

Exacerbated by climate change and resource scarcity, and despite a decrease in interstate conflict, the number of fragile states has increased in recent years and now stands at over forty. The development challenges in these states vary greatly, and they are the states least likely to meet the MDGs. Making matters more complicated, the UN's choice to partner with certain religious leaders and FBOs could have radical effects on the political landscape of a fragile state with competing claims to governmental authority. The conferral of resources and legitimacy to certain FBOs and religious leaders could mean the difference between one group gaining control and another.

A consultation participant from a prominent FBO gave an example of the UN tacitly favoring some religious groups over others. In the Swat valley in Pakistan, there are hundreds of thousands of refugees receiving aid from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), many of whom live in large camps organized by aid workers. Tens of thousands of these refugees belong to religious minority groups who feel unsafe in the larger camps. Some of these minority groups have established alternative camps, but they lack access to the resources delivered to the larger camps organized by the UN. Partnering with religious leaders and FBOs from the minority faith-based communities would help these camps to gain formal recognition and

receive valuable UN aid. Failing to recognize the desire of minority religious groups to remain separate and partnering solely with the dominant faith-based communities risks further exacerbating the hardship of vulnerable populations.

Consultation participants agreed that more academic research is needed on the role of religion in fragile states. In particular, systematic mapping of FBOs and other religious institutions providing basic infrastructure in these states is a necessary first step to partnering with FBOs. This research would help with aid coordination and protect the UN against making unilateral partnerships that tip the balance of power in a region.

## WOMEN, RELIGION, AND DEVELOPMENT

Some participants argued that women's rights and religion are rarely linked in studies on conflict and peacebuilding. This renders the activism of religious women doubly invisible. Inattention to religious women is a result partly of the secular and male-oriented bias of many scholars of international development and partly of the male-dominated hierarchies of most major religions, which exclude women even as the day-to-day life of many faith communities depends on their activity.

During the consultations, debates arose over how to describe women's activism, how state religion affects women's rights, and how development workers should engage religious women. All participants agreed that women play vitally important roles in pre-conflict activism, peacebuilding, and reconciliation, and that they need to be actively engaged as development partners, both in prominent leadership positions and at the grassroots level.

Discussions revolved around four issues concerning women, religion, and development: (1) limits placed on the roles of women and the importance of gender equality in the context of religion and development; (2) violence against women and the costs of total warfare; (3) the roles of (religious) women in pre-conflict activism, peacebuilding, and reconciliation; and (4) gender issues as a site of struggle between some local faith-based communities and UN values of human rights and gender equality.

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## LIMITED ROLES OF WOMEN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDER EQUALITY

Women's often limited and precarious access to power is one of the biggest challenges to engaging them as partners in development and peacebuilding. This is especially true in states where local cultural and religious beliefs openly place restrictions on the roles women can play in institutions, though not all discrimination is so overt. Women are often excluded from both secular and religious male-dominated hierarchies in subtle ways, and even when they successfully attain prominent positions of leadership, they frequently face criticisms directed solely toward their gender. Depending on their particular tradition and local iteration, religious women can be doubly bound by the restrictions of their culture

and their personal piety. Exclusion of women is not only harmful to the women themselves; it also limits the capacity and effectiveness of development efforts.

Despite being frequent targets or victims of violence, women are rarely involved in peace negotiations. A study of 33 recent peace negotiations conducted by the Escola de Cultura de Pau (Spain) found that only 4 percent of delegates—11 out of 280—were women. Of peace treaties signed since 1992, only 2.5 percent of signatories have been women, according to a limited but reasonably representative study by UN Women. As a result of this imbalance, negotiations tend to focus on typically “male” issues like disarmament and reemployment. They tend to ignore areas where women play crucial roles, such as rebuilding communities and economies based on domestic goods and services, instituting truth and reconciliation committees, and protecting against resurgences of sexual violence.

Many in the UN and the FBO community strongly argued that promoting gender equality in development and peacebuilding means more than engaging women in traditional positions of power, reforming exclusionary rules and practices, and encouraging them to take leadership roles in organizations. It also means expanding the definition of power by recognizing the roles women already play in development and peacebuilding. By extension, scholars and development actors need to map these complex, parallel networks of activism in order to understand them better and to discern how to partner with them most effectively.

Stereotypes play a large role in discrimination against women and the failure to recognize their capacities for peacebuilding and development. Beliefs that men are more aggressive and better negotiators while women are more compassionate and weaker in conflict limit women by discouraging their entry into certain positions of power and encouraging them to take supporting roles. Furthermore, seeing men and women these ways obscures the nature of the work women accomplish in the domains to which they do have access.

Secular perspectives on religious women sometimes overlook the power afforded them by the values and traditions of their religious structures, which they can draw on when mobilizing their communities and mediating conflicts. For instance, barred from many religious hierarchies, women often lead in less visible institutional religious contexts, such as hospitals, schools, and informal networks that support the community. One of the most effective peace initiatives of recent history, Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, united Christians and Muslims and played a major role in resolving Liberia’s civil war in 2003. At one point women forced peace talks through an impasse by threatening to strip naked in front of male delegates unless an agreement was reached. The episode illustrates how women can leverage religiously and culturally grounded norms to exercise leadership in peace negotiations in which they may occupy only marginal formal roles.

Religious structures also afford women particular forms of power that can be difficult for social scientists and other outsiders to identify clearly. By providing avenues for communication and sites for communion, religious structures and practices can facilitate the creation of parallel networks. Identifying and understanding these women’s networks would make them potential resources in peacebuilding and

development and would bring attention to the ways in which women exercise power despite widespread, systematic exclusion.

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## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

One simple reason for involving women in peacemaking efforts is that they are often targeted and victimized in the latest generation of total wars. Though the 2000 passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 increased awareness of the role that sexual violence against women (and sometimes men) plays in conflicts, violence against women frequently remains overlooked in the terse summaries of the casualties of war.<sup>11</sup> A grim “technology of warfare,” rape sows terror and is uniquely effective in frustrating reconciliation, especially in the civil conflicts in which it is so often a tactic. The wounds inflicted by sexual violence fester, as it is frequently impossible to discuss them openly.

In conflict zones, refugee camps, and shelters, women are especially vulnerable to abuse, rape, and sexually transmitted diseases. Giving birth in areas without access to medical facilities is particularly dangerous. In response, UNFPA has developed “Third Trimester Kits,” containing cloths, razor blades, gloves, and plastic blankets, which the organization—working with local, including faith-based, groups—distributes through the agency’s wide networks in crisis regions.

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## ROLES OF WOMEN IN PRE-CONFLICT ACTIVISM, PEACEBUILDING, AND RECONCILIATION

In addition to the four UN resolutions on women and violence approved since the passage of Resolution 1325, there are other signs of improvement. UN Women has sought to provide women’s civil society groups with various forms of support for their general activities as well as for peace-building initiatives. Building a case for women’s capacities is necessary to enhance their stature in the international community and to develop local constituencies. The larger these constituencies are, the greater women’s role is likely to be at the bargaining table.

Women’s involvement may be most important in pre-conflict stages, where their presence can have the effect of policing men’s behavior. But what factors determine whether women get involved in the first place? Women are not innately peace loving and conciliatory, and their capacity to promote peace depends on certain conditions being met.

Women’s precarious legal status in many fragile states forces them to bear the cost of war in more ways than direct violence. In countries where women are forbidden from owning land, widows tend to make

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<sup>11</sup> The mandate of Resolution 1325 calls for a redefinition of peacemaking, conflict resolution, and war itself so as to be more responsive to the particular types of violence perpetrated against women. It also calls attention to the particular contributions women can make to peace. United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1325, October 31, 2000, [http://www.un.org/events/res\\_1325e.pdf](http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf).



up the majority of displaced persons. For this reason UN Women has been active in promoting property law reform in peace settlement negotiations. A study by New School professor Mala Htun and Purdue University professor S. Laurel Weldon identifies state religion as the strongest correlate to the absence of legal protections against sexual violence and progressive property law.<sup>12</sup> The strongest correlate to legal protections is the presence of strong, native-grown women's movements.

Most participants agreed that religion per se is not to blame for the repression of women's rights and that, in fact, some religious institutions are true pioneers in social justice and women's empowerment. Nevertheless, even in the developed world, some religious institutions and personas still articulate positions that reflect lingering forms of repression and sexism.

An important conclusion—and call to action for academic representatives—was that much research is needed on women's roles in peacebuilding. The male-dominated hierarchies of secular and religious institutions frequently tend to exclude women from official leadership roles. Unable to work through traditional means within these institutions, women often form parallel networks of activism—particularly in religious domains—that are less visible to researchers on account of their informality and their fragile (or nonexistent) relationship to the dominant structures.

Women's work as influencers and mediators remains largely unaccounted for. And while this relative obscurity may sometimes be part of the reason for the success of certain negotiations, the benefits to documenting the work of women of faith, for historical record, precision, and policy implications, are critical. The challenges to researchers are significant, but they also make the research all the more useful for practitioners seeking effective partnerships—and often seeking to promote women's rights.

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<sup>12</sup> Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon, "State Power, Religion, and Women's Rights: A Comparative Analysis of Family Law," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 18, no. 1 (2011): 145–65.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Tensions between secular and religious perspectives arise not only between FBOs and international institutions, but also within each of these communities, as evidenced by the debates among participants in these consultations. Creating forums for interfaith and secular-religious debate on international development is an important step in understanding and respecting differences, as well as finding and pursuing shared goals. Forums like these were rare even just a decade ago, and today they represent one of the few places where academics, UN representatives, and leaders from faith groups can discuss their different perspectives and shared concerns.

By bringing scholars into conversation with representatives from FBOs and various UN agencies, these consultations provided a unique opportunity for practitioners to suggest areas in which they require more information and for academics to gain valuable insight into the most pressing problems facing development and peacebuilding.

The priority that participants most emphasized involved *increasing awareness of the need for systematic and studied partnerships between all development actors—UN agencies and FBOs*. While much has already been accomplished at the UN, and while many academics in international relations are increasingly turning their attention to religion and religious dynamics, secular biases and anxieties about religion persist.

Several participants urged *more visible cooperation across the various UN agencies*. In response to the demands of their individual missions, some UN agencies have led the way in researching and exploring partnerships with FBOs. The UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging FBOs is a major step in this process of coordination. Academic and FBO participants voiced the need for more opportunities to learn about the variety of possible forms of collaboration with the UN.

UNFPA appears to have established a precedent at the global, regional, and national levels in partnering with diverse FBOs, as well as documenting and developing the earliest guidelines to specifically address partnership dynamics. UNICEF, UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNEP, and many other UN agencies also have a history of partnering with FBOs at the country and global levels, but *systematic documentation and analysis—and, ideally, monitoring and evaluation of the impact of such partnerships over the years—require continued efforts*.

*Establishing clear policies and priorities for engaging with FBOs is a necessary step* if UN agencies are to pursue partnerships. Each agency must develop its own policies that take into account the challenges involved in their goals. Additionally, several participants from the UN urged UN agencies to *look beyond 2015 and the MDG priorities and to engage faith communities in the processes of assessing the MDGs, as well as in the identification of new or additional international sustainable development goals*. Consultation participants called for the UN to recognize the importance of engaging religious communities as part of wider civil society partnership efforts and not as an afterthought.

A number of UN representatives also expressed the need for *better information about the complex world of religion*. To collaborate effectively with FBOs, UN staff must better understand the religious cultures with which they seek to engage. Partnering with academics and academic institutions is one approach to resolving this need for knowledge, and seeking the counsel of multi-religious NGOs (such as the ICNY, one of the cosponsors of these consultations) that provide religious-specific knowledge is another. It is worth noting that since 2010 several of the participating UN agencies have partnered with the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) to provide a yearly UN staff exchange on “Faith and Development.”

Participants urged that the UN find ways to increase communication between policymakers at headquarters and practitioners in the field, allowing policymakers to learn from the difficulties faced by staff in the field and granting the field staff greater influence over policy on FBO engagement. One representative from a prominent FBO raised concerns over the UN’s responsiveness to the evolving needs of religious refugees. Security is a major concern at refugee and disaster relief camps, and since FBOs can summon significant human resources (volunteers), they can (and did) provide a small security contingent to protect the camps’ women, children, and older people. For these kinds of initiatives to flourish more systematically, however, lines of communication, flexibility, and openness of various UN agencies to nontraditional partners is required.

Participants raised another practical concern regarding scientific experts on HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, and climate change. While many participants agreed that establishing shared language and common goals with FBOs is important, many present also believed that the UN should present scientific evidence without compromise, and that the inclusion of such evidence in the dialogue should be a necessary precondition of the UN’s engagement with FBOs. While carefully tailoring these data to the particular sensitivities of certain faith-based communities would aid in dialogue, participants urged that *scientific findings must remain intact*.

Other participants noted that the UN’s success with engaging religious leaders and FBOs around HIV/AIDS has come from providing scientific evidence as well as brokering opportunities for convening medical doctors, religious leaders, and FBOs around the facts of HIV/AIDS and its lived repercussions. Many religious leaders have been receptive to the doctors’ messages and the practical solutions they offer, including the suggestion that the leaders distribute basic health information in their sermons and via pamphlets circulated in their places of worship.

Participants saw opportunities for mutually beneficial research in numerous areas of inquiry, as described below.

## SYSTEMATIC DATA COLLECTION ON FBOS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES: PROVIDING AN EVIDENCE BASE FOR THE “DEVELOPMENT DIVIDEND” OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

A primary point of agreement among participants was that *more systematic research was needed on FBOs, FBO networks, and their activities*. In many developing countries and fragile states, FBOs based in a wide range of faith traditions provide vital aid and infrastructure. The number and diversity of these FBOs, as well as their hesitation to document their development efforts, pose challenges to researchers. Even within faith traditions and denominations, FBOs do not always coordinate their efforts; especially within fragile states, FBOs and other NGOs often operate independently of local governments.

Surveys of academic research and policy documents on development indicate that there is still a lack of focused attention to religion in the international relations community. Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs has tried to map NGO and FBO resources by region and major issue, but researchers have found it difficult to find, validate, and compile information owing to organizations’ lack of objectivity in self-analysis and researchers’ assumptions about the roles of religious organizations. Basic religious literacy is needed from development institutions and basic development literacy from religious organizations. Religion matters in development work, and it is important to recognize this fact.

Researchers need accurate documentation of FBO activity, including catalogs and precise locations of their resources. Ideally, researchers would conduct this work with the aid of GIS mapping. To produce useful models and stronger foundations for dialogue, researchers must approach religion and development on a case-by-case basis. This means looking systematically at issues, countries, and regions while maintaining careful attention to religious differences. Since religious institutions are particularly important in fragile states, and since these are the states most in need of development, research on FBOs and religion in fragile states is greatly needed. Knowing this information about FBOs is key to any efforts at collaboration, both to reduce redundancy and to discover opportunities for partnership.

UN staff benefits from the expert knowledge of academics and FBO partners when deciding the FBOs with which they will partner, but the UN needs additional research that is accessible and translatable to policy needs, as well as guidelines for how to interact with religious organizations. *More knowledge is needed about religions and religious actors involved in development work, and UN actors need to be aware of the motivations of any FBOs with whom they partner*. Identifying FBOs with a development style that is consistent with the UN’s values would aid greatly in the establishment of productive partnerships.

Some consultation participants also said that *too much of the research on developing countries comes from the global North*. UN information centers exist around the world, and they could provide forums for convening academics, FBOs, and UN agency staff. While funding such efforts can be difficult, partnerships with FBOs might be a mutually beneficial way to raise money for locally sourced research on development.

*Problematic FBO self-evaluations pose serious challenges to researchers and potential development partners.* Consultation participants noted a lack of self-documentation on the part of many FBOs, particularly given that relatively few—if any—resources are devoted to self-acclaim. On the other hand, some participants complained that certain FBO self-evaluations often have an “advocacy character,” presenting an overly positive image of the FBO and omitting data that might compromise that image. Even independent evaluators sometimes draw their conclusions in advance and shy away from critical evaluations that might jeopardize future contracts with the organization being evaluated.

Several participants from the UN agencies encouraged researchers to play a larger role in FBO-related evaluation and assessment processes. Where and when possible, academics with formal fieldwork training could help address existing conflicts of interest and improve data collection on FBOs and their value-added. Better evidence and brokered dialogue would be beneficial both for the academics involved and for potential and actual development partnerships.

In general, scholars are also more familiar and comfortable with the complex research instruments needed to measure the contributions created by building partnerships—measuring the development dividend. Their expertise, and that of the affiliated institutions at the regional and national levels, should continue to inform development partnerships between the UN and FBOs.

#### MUTUAL “ENLIGHTENMENT” AND ESTABLISHING A SHARED LANGUAGE

Some representatives from UN agencies who attended the consultations suggested that there is a lack of basic understanding of religious differences among many of the staff in different UN entities. One participant said that many UN staff members and representatives come from secular educational and developmental practice backgrounds and are unfamiliar with the unique insights of FBOs. Another observed that many of those working on women’s rights within the UN are uncomfortable with religious institutions.

These are among the considerations that impede dialogue opportunities and learning. An evolving cross-understanding of secular and faith-based development work would facilitate the development of a shared language, which in turn would lead to the recognition of shared values. While there will always remain a tension around terminology and reference, the words currently being used, such as “religious communities,” “faith-based NGO/FBO,” and “faith-inspired organizations,” provide some means of moving forward.

It is important for both the United Nations as a whole and members of faith communities to remain open to the challenge of working together on common concerns, thus focusing on similarities that bind rather than differences that divide. Academic research should continue to shed light on common values and shared concerns, and on the outcomes of partnership at the community, national, and regional levels.

## CONCLUSION

The discussions co-sponsored by the SSRC, UNFPA, and ICNY, rich in content and varied in perspectives, highlight an important role that all three actors play, albeit in undefined manners. The role is that of brokering—a complex combination of convening, facilitating, mediating, and negotiating the shifting sands of human development. Such is the role that the three co-sponsors felt throughout the preparations, the actual conventions, and even in preparing this resulting report.

A strong case has been made, through the consultations and the narrative presented here, for continuing to broker this evolving discussion on sustainable human development—particularly insofar as it requires a living witness to rights, war and peace, gender relations, and the world of faith.

*“THE WORLD DOES NOT LACK THE RESOURCES TO  
ABOLISH POVERTY; IT ONLY LACKS THE RIGHT  
PRIORITIES.”*

*— JUAN SOMAVÍA, DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION*



SSRC



Religion and the United Nations:  
Development, Gender, and Peacebuilding

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**Religion and the United Nations:  
Dynamics of Development and Peacebuilding**

*Social Science Research Council  
One Pierrepont Plaza, 15<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Brooklyn, NY 11201*

*February 11, 2011  
12:00-2:00 pm*

*Speakers*

**Marc Scheuer**

Director, United Nations Alliance of Civilizations

**Jean Duff**

Senior Advisor for Strategy and Resources, Center for Interfaith Action

**Leslie Vinjamuri**

Co-Director, Centre for the International Politics of Conflict, Rights and Justice

*Moderator*

**Azza Karam**

Senior Advisor on Culture, United Nations Population Fund





Religion and the United Nations:  
Development, Gender, and Peacebuilding

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**Religion and the United Nations:  
Dynamics of Gender and Peacebuilding**

*United Nations Population Fund  
605 Third Avenue  
New York, NY 10158*

*April 26, 2011*

*Speakers*

**Katherine Marshall**

Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University

**Anne-Marie Goetz**

UN Women

**Jacqueline Moturi Ogega**

Women's Mobilization Program, Religion's for Peace

**Cecile Mazacurrati**

Humanitarian Programme, United Nations Population Fund

*Respondent*

**Gay Rosenblum-Kumar**

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

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### ***Third Consultation – Recommendations for Action***

*United Nations Population Fund  
605 Third Avenue  
New York, NY 10158*

*September 16, 2011*

#### *Agenda*

10:00 a.m. – 10:10 a.m.	Opening Remarks <i>Laura Laski, Chief, SRH Branch, Technical Division, UNFPA</i>
10:10 a.m. – 11:15 a.m.	The Roles of Faith-Based Organizations in Securing Gender Equality, Development, and Peacebuilding <i>Chair: Rev. Chloe Breyer, Interfaith Center of New York</i> <i>Interventions:</i> <i>Mr. Abed Ayoub, Islamic Relief USA</i> <i>Mr. Paul Mikov, World Vision International</i>
11:15 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.	Break
11:30 a.m. – 12:45 p.m.	Religion, Gender, and the Dynamics of Development and Peacebuilding: Reflections on Cross-Sector Engagement and Possibilities for Further Research <i>Chair: Dr. Jonathan VanAntwerpen, SSRC</i> <i>Interventions:</i> <i>Dr. David Little, University of Virginia School of Law</i> <i>Ms. Katherine Marshall, Georgetown and WFDD</i>
12:45 p.m. – 1:45 p.m.	Lunch
1:45 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.	Enhancing Partnerships with Faith-Based Organizations for Gender Equality, Development, and Peacebuilding: Opportunities for the United Nations <i>Chair: Dr. Azza Karam, UNFPA</i> <i>Speakers:</i> <i>Dr. Thomas Uthup, UN Alliance of Civilizations</i> <i>Mr. Stephen Hanmer, UNICEF</i>

## APPENDIX 2: LIST OF MEETING PARTICIPANTS



SSRC



Religion and the United Nations:  
Development, Gender, and Peacebuilding

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### Religion and the United Nations: Dynamics of Development and Peacebuilding

*Social Science Research Council  
One Pierrepont Plaza, 15<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Brooklyn, NY 11201*

*February 11, 2011*

#### **Participants**

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**Michael Barnett**, University Professor of International Affairs and Political Science, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University

**Verena Beittinger-Lee**, Research Associate, AHRC Religious NGOs and the United Nations Project, Religious Studies Department, School of European Culture and Languages, University of Kent

**Rev. Chloe Breyer**, Executive Director, Interfaith Center of New York

**Thu Cao**, Culture Consultant, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

**Tatiana Carayannis**, Deputy Director, Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, Social Science Research Council

**Henia Dakkak**, Technical Advisor on Humanitarian Response, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

**Ihab Al-Daqqaq**, PhD Candidate, Columbia University

**Natalia Dinello**, Political Environment Scanning Adviser, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

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**Jean Duff**, Senior Advisor for Strategy and Resources, Center for Interfaith Action

**Bani Dugal**, Principal Representative, Bahá'í International Community United Nations Office

**Stephen Hanmer**, Civil Society and Parliamentary Specialist, Programmes, United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF)

**Robert W. Hefner**, Professor of Anthropology, Director, Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs, Boston University

**Doug Hostetter**, Director, Mennonite United Nations Liaison Office

**Jeffrey Israel**, PhD Candidate, University of Chicago

**Azza Karam**, Senior Advisor, Culture, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

**David Little**, T.J. Dermot Dunphy Professor of the Practice in Religion, Ethnicity, and International Conflict, Harvard Divinity School

**Katherine Marshall**, Visiting Professor, Department of Government, Senior Fellow, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University

**Paul Mikov**, Director and United Nations Representative, World Vision International, New York

**Jacqueline Moturi Ogega**, Director, Women's Mobilization Program, Religions for Peace International

**Daniel Philpott**, Associate Professor of Political Science and Peace Studies, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame

**Natabara Rollosso**, Consultant, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

**Sarah Sayeed**, President, Women in Islam, Inc.

**Marc Scheuer**, Director, United Nations Alliance of Civilizations

**Janice Stein**, Belzberg Professor of Conflict Management, Department of Political Science, Director, Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto

**Alfred C. Stepan**, Wallace S. Sayre Professor of Government, Director, Center for the Study of Democracy, Toleration, and Religion, School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University

**Joop Theunissen**, Deputy Chief, NGO Branch, Office for United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Support and Coordination, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)

**Thomas Uthup**, Research and Education Manager, United Nations Alliance of Civilizations

**Jonathan VanAntwerpen**, Program Director, Religion and the Public Sphere, Social Science Research Council

**Leslie Vinjamuri**, Co-Director, Centre for the International Politics of Conflict, Rights and Justice

**Matthew Weiner**, Director of Programs, Interfaith Center of New York



Religion and the United Nations:  
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**Religion and the United Nations:  
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*United Nations Population Fund  
605 Third Avenue  
New York, NY 10158*

*April 26, 2011*

***Participants***

**Amy Adamczyk**, John Jay College of Criminal Justice

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**Nazish Ahmad**, St. Thomas University

**Nadira Khuday Berdueva**, Quaker United Nations Office

**Alison Boden**, Princeton University

**W. Bramwell Bailey**, International Social Justice Commission

**Joanne Chang**, TZU Chi Compassion Relief Foundation

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**Anne Marie Goetz**, United Nations Women (UNWOMEN)

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**Arvind Kaur**, United Sikhs

**Venketachalam Krishnan**, United Nations InterAgency Task Force on Faith Based Organizations for the Millennium Development Goals – United Nations Office for Partnerships (UNOP)

**Peter Lin**, TZU Chi Compassion Relief Foundation

**David Little**, Harvard University

**Clayton Maring**, Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding

**Katherine Marshall**, Georgetown University

**Jacqueline Moturi Ogega**, Religions for Peace International

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**Gay Rosenblum-Kumar**, United Nations Development Programme Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery

**Sarah Sayeed**, Interfatih Center of New York and Women in Islam, Inc.

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**Leni Silverstein**, LMS Strategies for Development

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**Toby Volkman**, Luce Foundation

**Matthew Weiner**, Interfaith Center of New York

***Third Consultation – Recommendations for Action***

*United Nations Population Fund*

*605 Third Avenue*

*New York, NY 10158*

*September 16, 2011*

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**Jeffrey Israel**, University of Chicago

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**Emeka Obiezu**, Augustinians International

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**Matthew Weiner**, Princeton University



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**Moez Doraid**, UN Women

**Stephen Hanmer**, UN InterAgency Task Force on FBOs for the MDGs – UNICEF

**Azza Karam**, UNFPA

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**Mari Ortega**, UNAIDS

**Marc Scheuer**, UNAOC

**Thomas Uthup**, UNAOC

**Moises Venancio**, UNDP

## GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

FBO	Faith-Based Organization
ICNY	Interfaith Center of New York
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
SSRC	Social Science Research Council
UN	United Nations
UNAOC	United Nations Alliance of Civilizations
UN ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN DPI	United Nations Department of Public Information

# AN SSRC REPORT



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