

Religious Freedom and Integral Human Development: A New Global Platform to Change the Conversation Concept

With 5 years to go to achieve the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), no country is on track to do so. The SDGs have become an empty acronym, blunting the reality that we are not just speaking of theories or targets, but existential challenges: poverty, war, discrimination, environmental degradation and access to resources. The lack of religious freedom represents a similarly existential challenge across the world. Watchdogs report high and sustained levels of religious persecution and discrimination through state and societal violations of this human right. This leads, in turn, to acute polarisation and discrimination, rising social hostility and communal violence often intertwined with a new wave of religious nationalism and extremism.

The right of Freedom of Religion or Belief —which includes freedom of thought, conscience and religious freedom— encompasses not only traditional religious beliefs but all non-theistic beliefs as well as the right not to believe. Enshrined in article 18 of the UDHR, it is interconnected with other human rights and a key component of flourishing, peaceful societies with clear connections to the SDGs Agenda. Yet the relationship between Religious Freedom and Sustainable Development has been overlooked: Religious Freedom receives little to no mention within the SDGs and has long been absent from policy conversations on international development. And so, an urgent question arises: *How can we talk of “leaving no one behind”, the central promise of the 2023 SDGs Agenda, if we neglect all those who are marginalized, discriminated against and persecuted owing to their very beliefs? How can we better understand the mutually defining relationship between the right to development and the right to religious freedom?* [Panel 1]

The rights to development and religious freedom are rooted in a claim about the nature of the human person and about the priority to be given to the demands of human dignity. In his historic address to the United Nations on September 25, 2015 Pope Francis declared that, with respect to the newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals:

*... the simplest and best measure and indicator of the implementation of the new Agenda for development will be effective, practical and immediate access, on the part of all, to essential material and spiritual goods: housing, dignified and properly remunerated employment, adequate food and drinking water; **religious freedom and, more generally, spiritual freedom and education.** These pillars of **integral human development** have a common which is the right to life and, more generally, what we could call the right to existence of human nature itself.¹*

¹ Pope Francis, [Address to the United Nations Headquarters](#), New York on September 25, 2015.

Integral Human Development is a holistic model of human flourishing rooted in the inherent dignity of each person and every person. It is based on the idea that development is not the same as economic growth and requires attention to, what Clemens Sedmak calls “dignity needs”, which are “a class of personal needs that allow a person to live a dignified life. It moves beyond food and shelter to the inner life... Integral Human Development expresses an understanding of development that recognises the importance of (the idea of) the soul”².

This one-day conference explores the proposition that the idea of Integral Human Development speaks powerfully to our global predicament. While Integral Human Development is of Catholic provenance, its ideas and values are based on the dignity of the human person in ways which explicitly echo and complement holistic accounts of human development from other religious, philosophical, and wisdom traditions. By taking into account this broader human development context and by engaging religious actors and multi-faith perspectives in doing so, Integral Human Development shifts our approach to the global crisis of freedom of religion or belief and the policy response to it in innovative ways. Accordingly, the conference asks: *In what ways might religious freedom promote integral human development? And to what extent might the framework of integral human development incorporate religious freedom and address its global crisis?* [Panel 1] The ambition is to explore the grounds and set the foundations to create a new, religious-sensitive global platform for engaging religious and policy leaders globally on this topical policy agenda.

Religious discrimination is a cross-cutting issue, meaning that protecting Religious Freedom strengthens multiple SDGs. Across the world, people are marginalised on the grounds of their religion or belief. This not only affects the right of millions to practice their religion or belief; it includes severe socio-economic restrictions for religious minorities. Numerous cases have been found of religious discrimination impeding access to healthcare (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), food (SDG 2), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and decent work (SDG 8) where religious minorities are forced into unsafe, low-paid sectors within the economy, leaving many economically marginalized and poverty stricken (SDG 1). *How might this policy agenda look different when seen through the prism of Integral Human Development? What can the policy community learn from a spiritually-inspired understanding of human development in which securing the cultural and religious requirements of human flourishing is central to political and social life?* [All Panels]

In recent years, governments have strengthened their foreign policy tools, global advocacy efforts and international coordination to promote Religious Freedom. There is, however, a growing feeling that the current approaches appear overall to be failing, as religious persecution and discrimination continue to increase in many parts of the world. Governments have begun identifying dedicated Religious Freedom appointees, teams and funding streams; and policymakers increasingly recognise the role for religious actors as a strategic partner in advancing the sustainable development of inclusive societies. Yet limitations remain. Government appointees are rarely meaningfully resourced and there is a lack of cross-governmental collaboration. More fundamentally, policymakers and practitioners remain unsure how to strategically engage with religious actors to respond to the global decline of Religious Freedom, and harness the potential of this approach to foster lasting peace and contribute to the SDGs. A number of innovative and potentially effective areas of policy engagement deserve further reflection and consideration.

² Clemens Sedmak (2023), *Enacting Integral Human Development*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, xiv.

First, [Panel 2] there is an argument that Religious Freedom and economic development go hand-in-hand. *Is there evidence, however, that Religious Freedom is correlated with national-level economic development? Or is Religious Freedom's relevance to prosperity, decent work and poverty reduction more visible within local, grassroots development? At this local level, do Religious Freedom violations and religious discrimination overlap with economic dominance of sectors, job discrimination, land rights, and foreign investment being siphoned to one identity group?*

Second, [Panel 3] in order to advance Religious Freedom and the SDGs, the need for more effective interreligious engagement strategies has been identified—that is, bottom-up, multi-party collaboration across identity divides, including effective religious engagement and multilateral collaboration. Interreligious engagement has been outlined as a bottom-up, community-based approach, which sees religious actors working collaboratively across religious and belief divides, in partnerships with governments, international organisations and other civil society groups. *Are there deeper connections between the practice of inter-religious dialogue, collaboration, and encounters, and the recognition that Religious Freedom is a value within specific religious traditions? Can we identify and explore theological trends that prioritise Religious Freedom—trends that are emerging alongside the relevant religious organisation's engagement in interreligious dialogue and its adoption of a new approach to it as a practice?*

Finally, [Panel 4] the global protection and advocacy of Religious Freedom is suffering from a deficit of trust. It continues to be seen in some quarters as a partisan, calculating, political tool, often displaying double-standards and favouritism of some groups. This perception that Religious Freedom is being used to further international agendas is damaging and must be addressed. *Is Religious Freedom advocacy merely or mostly the case of the Global North preaching to the Global South, with Religious Freedom and the SDGs being seen in many countries as a neo-colonial, 'Western' endeavour with a hidden agenda? How can we move past this suspicion and sincerely engage leaders and actors across the world? How might our approach to religious freedom change through such engagement? Can the dignity-based approach and language of Integral Human Development contribute to this effort?*

DRAFT STRUCTURE – 5 June

Panel 1: An Introduction: The Global Crisis of Religious Freedom through the lens of Integral Human Development

Panel 2: Religious Freedom & Global Development: Evidence, challenges and opportunities from the perspective of Integral Human Development

Panel 3: An Interreligious Conversation: Integral Human Development, Human Dignity and Religious Freedom

Panel 4: From Idea to Policy Impact: Looking at Religious Freedom through the lens of IHD, what difference does this make?

Concluding High-Level Roundtable