



Faith to Action Network: A Permanent Balancing Act

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INTRODUCTION: TENSIONS BETWEEN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS, HUMAN RIGHTS AND FAITH TEACHINGS AND VALUES?

Faith organisations contribute substantially to realising the Sustainable Development Goals (hereinafter referred to as the SDGs). Deeply rooted in the communities they serve (Mbiti 1999), faith organisations reach large numbers of people with messages on health, gender equality and peace that resonate with local beliefs and culture and provide social

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services through sustained networks of support. A World Bank study suggests that their contributions to health services in sub-Saharan Africa range between 30% to 40% (Olivier and Wodon 2012). This is why many governments and development stakeholders have realised that engaging faith organisations is an important pathway to achieving development goals. However, many faith organisations grapple with tensions between understandings of the SDGs, human rights and their faith teachings and values. It is these tensions which prompted the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief (2018: 11) to state that, “freedom of religion or belief can never be used to justify violations of the rights of women and girls, and that it can no longer be taboo to demand that women’s rights take priority over intolerant beliefs used to justify gender discrimination.”

Faith organisations’ understanding of development is often different from that of governments and secular organisations because it includes material, social, and spiritual dimensions (James 2009; Tadros 2010; Jajkowicz 2014). Therefore, the nature of a faith organisation’s development agenda is often difficult to determine. For example, many faith organisations support different aspects of sexual and reproductive health and rights included in SDG 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages). They have developed nuanced positions, teachings and opinions on what is permitted and what is not. However, perceptions abound that faith organisations are fully opposed to or do not support sexual and reproductive health and rights (Jajkowicz 2014; Marshall 2015; Wilkinson et al. 2019). Looking at gender equality as articulated in SDG 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), Tadros (2010) notes that often a single organisation takes different standpoints on various gender issues. Faith organisations give women access to social capital and networks, through a range of spiritual and social activities, while at the same time delineating how they can

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exercise their agency within often patriarchal frameworks. As regards SDG 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies...), social hostilities involving religion have increased in the past decade (Pew Research Center 2019). Yet, “as a powerful constituent of cultural norms,” faith is deeply implicated in individual and social conceptions of peace, respect and tolerance, because it addresses some of the most profound existential issues of human life, such as freedom/inevitability, fear/security, right/wrong and sacred/profane (Said and Funk 2002: 37–38). Such critical challenges ought to be addressed, “not because there will ever be a total agreement but so that common values can emerge in authentic ways and areas of difference can be better understood and managed” (Marshall 2017: 56).

This chapter explores the role of the Faith to Action Network in addressing these tensions by creating spaces and capacity for faith organisations to articulate themselves while engaging constructively in development processes.

THE FAITH TO ACTION NETWORK

During a range of interfaith consultations on “faith and family planning” in 2011, representatives from 250 faith organisations concluded that they needed a global platform to engage in contested areas. Instead of ignoring or closing their eyes on the topics they felt uncomfortable with, they wanted to confront them through brave debates, mutual learning, increased collaboration, while partnering constructively with governments and other stakeholders. This platform needed to be owned and managed by the faith community on its terms, to set its agenda, define its processes and language. The participants in the consultations mandated six institutions to make the “Faith to Action Network” operational. These six founding institutions are the African Council of Religious Leaders—Religions for Peace (ACRL-RfP), Catholic Organization for Relief and Development Aid (Cordaid), Christian Connections for International Health (CCIH), Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa (CAPA), International Islamic Centre for Population Studies and Research, Al Azhar University (IICPSR) and Persyarikatan Muhammadiyah.

In joining the network, members committed to leveraging their institutions and networks to provide services and education, and influence government and donor policies and funding. The founding principles emphasized respect of each other’s diverse faiths and needs while

emphasizing the importance of human rights and social justice.¹ Membership was also motivated by their shared conviction that change was possible across religious boundaries, and more importantly, that they could make it happen. Over the years, Faith to Action Network has evolved into a global interfaith network of more than 110 Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Confucian, Hindu and Muslim faith organisations in 27 countries on four continents. It has also refined its mission to mobilise faith organisations' support for family health and wellbeing. Its current strategic focus is on issues that faith actors are grappling with, including sexual and reproductive health and family planning as stipulated by SDG 3; gender equality and women's rights as stipulated by SDG 5; as well as peaceful coexistence as stipulated by SDG 16. Its strategies are to engage in policy-making processes, strengthen faith organisations' capacity to contribute to development processes, communicate development and human rights content, promote interfaith experience sharing, learning and exchanges, undertake research and demonstration projects and offer small grants for interfaith work.

THE MASK OF RELIGION HAS BEEN REMOVED

Faith to Action Network's contribution to addressing tensions between faith teachings and practices and human rights and the SDGs merits closer analysis. First, it is a hub for faith organisations that want to make their voice heard but these same organisations often feel isolated from national or global development processes. Faith to Action Network members come in all forms and sizes: They are centralised, decentralised, formal, informal, networked, grassroots, elitist, medical, social and spiritual. They include 1000-year-old universities (such as Al Azhar University), and local youth organisations (for example, Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance). Others are national and regional umbrella networks of faith institutions (for example, All Africa Conference of Churches; Ethiopian Inter-Faith Forum for Development; and Supreme Council for the Confucian Religion in Indonesia), and also local interfaith networks of different faith groups (such as the Western Ugandan FBO Forum). These institutions find it challenging to advocate or speak out on the tensions between their faith teachings, human rights and SDGs. However, they all have a mutual interest in finding solutions to shared problems and articulating a

¹Interfaith Declaration to improve family health and wellbeing of June 29th 2011.

compassionate voice. Their representatives include women and men, youth, ordained clergy and lay leaders of different faiths, different origins and different professions.

Grape and Karam (2016: 6) have pointed out that “religious women and advocates of the human rights’ agenda are rarely heard in global dialogues and negotiations, and when they are present, their voices and perspectives are often on the margins.” Faith to Action Network has provided a platform on which women and youth can articulate their perspectives and preferences, even in cases where they don’t hold most senior positions in faith hierarchies. In 2019, for example, Faith to Action Network’s convention celebrated its members by awarding prizes for outstanding achievements. After presenting their work, participants voted according to different categories. Many women and young people were honoured for their efforts. Among these was Ms. Farida Abdulbasit from the Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance who was recognised for transforming mosques into safe spaces for women and girls. Her organisation’s work has offered platforms to youth and women to express their perspectives and address grievances.

Second, the network encourages and supports norms entrepreneurship at all levels. As “norm entrepreneurs,” faith actors are well-suited to leading the change of social norms. Passionate individuals, who are well connected or highly central to a faith organisation, or who have high status, can play a key role in catalysing normative change (Ragab et al. 2018). The network seeks to integrate sexual and reproductive health and rights, women’s rights and gender justice, peaceful coexistence into theology and pastoral care, faith organisations’ institutional policies and practice, faith-run schools, universities and health facilities. For example, the network has worked with the Organisation of African Instituted Churches to develop guidance documents on gender justice. At the All Africa Conference of Churches’ General Assembly in 2018, it supported the women’s pre-conference develop a communiqué that articulated their vision: “as women from Africa (...), we recommend to: (...) interpret the Bible in liberating ways for all, being careful of the temptation/tendency to use patriarchal values that undermine the dignity of women, in the interpretation of gender-biased biblical texts”.

Third, the network has increased faith organisations’ participation in decision-making processes, from local to global, and has nurtured dialogue between religious and non-religious organisations effectively. Faith to Action Network members see “value in the international nature of the

network, in the connectivity to a variety of organisations and actors addressing the same issues” (Veldkamp et al. 2016: 19). Very often, policymakers are biased by their own cultural and faith backgrounds. A review of proceedings of the East African Legislative Assembly shows the pervasive presence of faith and religion in parliamentary debates. For example, the Assembly’s 165th sitting² started with a prayer, and continued to debate family law. Parliamentarians constantly referred to their private faiths. One parliamentarian stated; “I would have quoted for him the relevant verse of the Koran and this is on Surat Nisa”. Others admit being informed by obscure faith expert groups outside parliament. Enabling faith organisations to participate in such decision-making processes helps clarify faith-based arguments. Rather than leaving the interpretation of faith texts to unknown individuals or even private opinions, the network enables access to authoritative and credible faith voices.

Thus, Faith to Action Network has accompanied policy-making processes through faith-based delegations, meetings and press conferences. Since 2017, it has organised an interfaith delegation to the Commission on Population and Development in collaboration with the Church of Sweden and ACT alliance. Its presence is increasingly felt, by participating in national delegations, in panel discussions and also submitting written and oral statements. The network has taken a leadership role in informing members of the East African Legislative Assembly in faith and sexual and reproductive health and rights. In Uganda and Kenya, it has spearheaded the development of sub-national costed family planning implementation plans. Kenyan government representatives were proud about the network’s contribution to policy-making and even to implementation of policies at the grass-root level. Thus, “The integrity of religious leaders make their contributions undoubted and their influence comes in handy in making the population go with the policies of the government” (Veldkamp et al. 2016: 18). Claiming space at the table has also allowed faith organisations to be involved in policymaking from an early stage. Rather than being invited at the tail end of a process, they have been engaged throughout various processes. This has created opportunities to offer their views. This meaningful participation has increased faith organisations’ acceptance and ownership of policies. In turn, it has improved the likelihood that they will support the implementation of these policies. For example, in 2017,

²The Official Report of the Proceedings of the East African Legislative Assembly / 165th sitting—third assembly: fifth meeting—fifth session / Wednesday, 8 March 2017.

together with the All African Conference of Churches, the network organised the African Union faith consultations on the new African Union Gender Strategy. Veldkamp et al. (2016: 18) identify Faith to Action Network

as a major rallying point for international policy-making processes related to sexual and reproductive health and rights, because it monitors and influences international sexual and reproductive health and rights policies. Its members ‘have gained a better understanding of global and local issues.’

Fourth, the network has enhanced faith organisations’ access to information, skills, resources and social capital. It has contributed towards addressing many intangible barriers to participation in development efforts. Language is one of the major barriers. A Kenyan faith leader advises, “Language becomes totally provocative, even violent to some people. We must be very sensitive about how we are using language. The presentation matters, the packaging matters, the content matters and even how we deliver it matters” (Jajkowitz 2014). Faith to Action Network has made Sustainable Development Goals and human rights language accessible to faith organisations. It has analysed information, presented and explained by drawing on faith scriptures, sources and teachings, and complemented with evidence and testimonials. Methodological guidance developed in 2019 emphasizes:

Without shying away from controversial topics, it draws on faith scriptures and teachings, medical knowledge and socio-economic insights to jointly reflect and increase faith actors’ understanding and support for family planning and reproductive health. This helps clarify myths and misconceptions. (Ragab et al. 2020: 4)

In 2020, Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano facilitated the development of three interfaith briefs. These briefs were developed by 14 Southern African faith organisations on “gender-based violence”, “teenage pregnancy” and “sexual and reproductive health and rights.” Another barrier to participation in development efforts is the person communicating the information, especially when the person’s background becomes more important than the message. Such background includes gender, race, socio-economic power and religion among others. Together with its members, Faith to Action Network has organised exchanges where local

faith organisations gain access to global or transnational faith authorities. A case in point is the Learning Caravan championed by Al Azhar University. A multidisciplinary team of scholars from Al Azhar University travels, as in a caravan, to different areas to deliberate with faith leaders on reproductive health, family planning and women's rights. By involving respected scholars from Al Azhar University, the Caravan makes it possible to address deep-rooted misconceptions about, and resistance to, specific issues, and motivates Muslim faith leaders and communities to become champions. The Caravan has been implemented in over 14 countries worldwide (Van Eerdewijk et al. 2018).

A third barrier relates to the conditions of participation in development processes. Many existing capacity development mechanisms have focused on a small range of development professionals and advocates. Local faith leaders do not have access to these mechanisms. For example, they are not invited to advocacy workshops and conferences because they do not fit the selection criteria for several reasons: their perspectives might not fully match Northern bureaucrats' vision of development; they might be unable to develop a conference abstract, and they do not articulate their thoughts in what power brokers consider as rational empirical terms. To address these challenges, Faith to Action Network has given them multiple channels to access information and skills, including global interfaith conferences during the International Conferences on Family Planning in Indonesia (2016) or Rwanda (2018), Faith to Action Network's conventions (2018 and 2019), regional dialogues on the African continent such as the Keep Girls in School Conference (2019) in Nigeria, Southern African Development Community interfaith dialogues (2019), and numerous national and subnational meetings in Burundi, DRC, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Uganda, South Sudan, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Members confirm that activities were organised "for the members and by the members" (Veldkamp et al. 2016: 12). Hall (2020) confirms the relevance of this work.

Another barrier (fourth) to participation concerns the methods of engagement. As it were, secular and faith stakeholders articulate their theories of change on achieving the SDGs very differently. For faith organisations, the "definition of 'development' includes a spiritual dimension (consistent with their theological beliefs about the spiritual nature of human beings)" (James 2009: 15). Their main reference frameworks are sacred text and sources, as well as faith practices such as prayer and

worship. The Network and its members have addressed this challenge by trying different methods. In 2018, for example, it organised interfaith celebrations on family planning and reproductive health. The first step of the celebrations required participants to move through three different stations where they prayed for remembrance for those who “have lost their lives through childbirth or conflict”. The second step required them to pray about challenges, such as “cultures that encourage early marriage” or “government policies in which girls do not go back to school if pregnant”. The last step required them to pray for and celebrate “religious leaders who openly support access to sexual and reproductive health services” and “youth who can make informed choices that enable them to gain their full potential.” Such responses to the challenge have empowered the Network members. For example, Burundian faith organisations acknowledge that their participation in several Faith to Action Network training has improved their contacts with journalists and civil servants. Equipped with new knowledge and skills, they have organised follow-up workshops in Burundi for decision-makers and religious leaders to develop a shared guide on sexual and reproductive health (Veldkamp et al. 2016). Moreover, membership in the Faith to Action Network has increased organisations’ social capital. According to Veldkamp et al. (2016), members see value in social networking and learning. In their words,

Membership puts them on the market for speaking engagements, panel group discussions, dialogue and other related activities. Some interviewees gained huge recognition by policymakers, received invitations from religious leaders, church groups and communities or were approached to share their knowledge about specific issues, as the language of birth spacing. (Veldkamp et al. 2016: 21)

Indeed, many who joined the network during its early days have made remarkable career trajectories, rising in ranks within their organisations.

Fifth, Faith to Action Network has triggered and contributed to interfaith action and coordination. Its “dialogical approach” (Knitter 2013), “goes beyond theoretical theological debates and engages participants in pragmatic problem-solving” (Ragab et al. 2020: 4). It focuses on collaborative action as a response to injustice, even as they continue to disagree on what is just. This approach offers safe spaces for interfaith dialogues. Thus, “Discussions are non-judgmental, compassionate, solidary” (Ragab et al. 2020: 4). In faith circles, there are many misconceptions and a simple

lack of understanding of different world views, including religious traditions (Marshall 2017). Organised without the glare of publicity, the Caravan methodology encourages faith actors to raise frank questions and engage in brave debates (Ragab et al. 2020). Typically, these activities are accompanied by a consensus document or a declaration and followed up by interfaith action plans. Faith organisations have thus negotiated an *interfaith consensus on family health and wellbeing* (2011), a *joint commitment in support of child spacing* of 63 Kenyan imams (2016), or an *interfaith statement on family planning and reproductive health* in Sud Kivu (2019). These declarations are signed and published through press conferences, meetings with external stakeholders and disseminated in places of worship.

Faith to Action Network supports interfaith action by providing small grants and financial support. As the Network's secretariat does not have any funds of its own, it supports interfaith actions from project grants and contracts. The secretariat has made deliberate efforts to integrate sub-granting mechanisms into all its programmes so that its members gain access to financial resources for interfaith actions. For example, since 2018, together with Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa and the African Council of Religious Leaders—Religions for Peace, it has managed a multi-country programme to enhancing the understanding, tolerance and respect for cultural and religious diversity among young women and men at risk of radicalisation. Its sub-granting scheme finances youth programmes, sometimes called “dialogue of every day” (Marshall 2017: 43), which increase young people's knowledge of their own and other people's faith and culture. Coupled with an improvement of attitudes, emotional response and empathy towards others, the Network's interventions have helped young people overcome faith-, culture- and gender-based stereotypes and negative perceptions towards others.

Faith to Action Network has imparted skills and practices of inclusive interfaith and intercultural activities and built common ground among people holding different worldviews. This has helped young people believe in their role as agents and facilitators of interfaith/cultural dialogue and their ability to constructively and peacefully participate in public life (Shauri 2019; Katungi 2019). Amongst others, the grants have supported the Interreligious Council of Burundi to engage faith leaders as mediators between young people of different political, ethnic and religious backgrounds in Muyinga, Rumonge, Bujumbura Rural and Bujumbura Mairie provinces. It has supported the Anglican Diocese of Egypt to organise

interfaith youth programmes in Gusour Cultural Centre in Cairo, Old Cairo, and Ezbet El-Nakhl and El-Salam City Community Centres in Cairo. Young women and men of different faith backgrounds come together for pantomime, drumming and other joint activities. With Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance, it has organised interfaith and intergenerational dialogues and activities in Mombasa and Kilifi.

According to Halafoff (2013: 4), there are thousands of interfaith initiatives, “from small local grassroots efforts to national-level conflict resolution and transnational organizations that span the globe”. Marshall (2017) points out that these initiatives remain mostly separate and largely uncoordinated. Through establishing the Faith to Action Network, its members have attempted to better coordinate their actions. Members in Rwanda, Ghana, and Burundi say that the Faith to Action Network responds to “the urgent need to create unity between different religious leaders and groups in their countries” (Veldkamp et al. 2016: 11). In Kenya, faith leaders and organisations have realised that other faith leaders face similar challenges. They appreciate that Faith to Action Network has eased cooperation, by removing religion as an obstacle and made it a resource for solutions. Thus, “the mask of religion has been removed” (Veldkamp et al. 2016: 19).

ALTERNATIVE PATHS TO ENGAGE IN THE SDGs

Faith organisations’ societal and political influence, their reach and trust amongst large swathes of the world’s population, and their vast networks of hospitals, schools and other platforms, are untapped potential in reaching the SDGs. The Lutheran World Federation speaks of sleeping giants that must be woken up.³ During the Faith to Action Network 2018 convention, Rev. Canon Grace Kaiso, the network’s chairperson and General Secretary of Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa reminded participants:

You enjoy legitimacy, respect and influence; please use this immense potential to bring behavioural and attitudinal change in the society, your contribution to development and implementation of value-based policies at local, regional and global levels is very much needed.

³<https://wakingthegiant.lutheranworld.org/>.

With its focus on contested areas, Faith to Action Network makes important contributions to achieving the SDGs 3, 5 and 16. Guided by respect and sensitivity, the network offers its members alternative paths to engage on sexual and reproductive health and rights, women's rights and gender justice and peaceful coexistence. It offers faith organisations a platform to understand, engage and take action. These paths are more adapted to faith organisations' worldviews. Its members emphasise that Faith to Action Network responds to the urgent need "to stimulate interfaith dialogue and collaboration on sexual and reproductive health and rights topics, including the promotion of maternal health and the fight against HIV/AIDS" (Veldkamp et al. 2016: 11). The network is a space for expression as well as transparent dialogue on divergent views which has led to common engagement (Veldkamp et al. 2016). Faith to Action Network's solution-oriented approach translates this in tangible improvements for communities across the world. Only the tip of the iceberg has been documented, utilising empirical methods. Much remains undocumented. Meanwhile, the following are some examples of these achievements.

Jointly, Faith to Action Network members have contributed to numerous policy changes. A rough review of these processes between 2015 and 2019, counts 62 policies, budget and administrative changes in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, one in HIV/AIDS, three in health more broadly and two in adolescent health. Members have participated in four policy changes on gender-based violence and six on women's rights and gender justice more broadly. For example, the Uganda Joint Christian Council organised a national women's prayer day and handed a petition to the speaker of parliament, issued a pastoral letter and concluded the day with a press conference on women's rights. Rights defined at one level are often denied because of norms operating at another level. Changes in social norms, attitudes and practices are key to transforming the lives of women and girls, men and boys. Faith to Action Network members have leveraged their influence to adapt and reform their policies, teachings and practices. Thus, 35 changes have been reported in the areas of sexual and reproductive health and rights, one in gender-based violence, one in health, nine in women's rights and gender justice, three in the area of peacebuilding. Further, 29 additional changes are emerging. The Muslim Family Counselling Services has implemented a campaign to fight female genital mutilation and child marriages in Ghana. The Evangelical Association of Malawi has developed and adopted a sexual and

reproductive health and rights policy, and currently disseminates it to its 70 member churches. The Ibrahimia Media Center organised a workshop to respond to domestic violence, and launched the Arabic version of a toolkit titled “ending domestic violence—a pack for churches”. During its General Assembly, the All Africa Conference of Churches developed a new strategy prioritising women’s rights and reproductive health, and inter-faith understanding. The Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust has engaged over 45 Apostolic groupings in Zimbabwe and sensitised them on the importance of developing teachings and policies that address gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy. It has created safe spaces where women and adolescent girls can talk about sexual reproductive health. In its Muslim women leaders’ workshop, the Fatima Zahra Women’s Organisation introduced Fatima Zahra (AS), the daughter of the holy prophet of Islam as a role model of Muslim women, and justified gender equality based on religious sources. It trained 55 participants from Manicaland Province, Mutare, Midlands Province, Shurugwi and Gweru, Matabeleland Province, Bulawayo, Chitungwiza, Kadoma and local areas in Harare. In Uganda, the Rgt. Rev. Stanley Ntagali, Archbishop of the Anglican Province of Uganda, wrote a pastoral letter urging clergy to include messages on child spacing and ending teenage pregnancy into their sermons.

Through Faith to Action Network’s large-scale family planning programme, the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, Anglican Development Services Mount Kenya East, Christian Health Association of Kenya and the Organisation of African Instituted Churches have expanded women’s access to health services in Kenya’s most marginalized counties. In one year, they have strengthened 72 faith-based facilities to deliver these life-saving services, conducted 500 outreaches, trained 180 health workers, trained 212 community health volunteers, 36 community-based distributors and 248 faith leaders. These stakeholders work hand in hand to share medical information and faith teachings on family planning with women and men. Faith leaders conducted sermons and khutbahs on health timing and spacing of pregnancies and participated in community outreaches. The Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology’s Masters’ course has become a growing academic discipline by increasing the number of graduates and enabling health and gender experts to work across disciplinary boundaries. In addition, 121 graduates have been trained since it integrated family planning into its curriculum. Recently, it revised its curriculum, now with courses in “Faith, Gender, Health and Development in Africa”;

“Psychosocial Issues in Gender and Health”; “Philosophy of Gender and Sexuality”; “Fundamentals of Gender and Reproductive Health” and a Practicum. Further, 1108 Ethiopian Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, Seventh-day Adventists and Protestant faith leaders have graduated from its faith and community leaders training package. At the community level, 1538 women and children have accessed improved preventive health services while enhancing the capacity of a women health development army.

Formed in 2012 by the Roman Catholic Church, Church of Uganda, several mosques and other faith organisations, the Western Uganda FBO Network (WUFBON) has 82 faith-based member organisations. Its advocacy to the Kyenjojo district leadership has greatly improved access to family planning services in Western Uganda. Between 2015 and 2017, the district’s total number of family planning clients increased by about 50% from 14,987 to 22,016 (HMIS data).

Through its youth programme to increase interfaith and intercultural understanding, Faith to Action Network reached 9489 youths with interfaith messages of respect, understanding and tolerance in six African countries in 2019. An analysis of resulting behavioural changes in Kenya’s multi-faith coastal counties showed that young people’s awareness of similarities between each-others faith had increased from 33.3% to 50.7%. Young people who felt that their grievances were not addressed reduced from 36% at baseline to 21.2%. The share of those who believed that their cultural differences don’t allow peaceful coexistence dropped from 22.2% to 3% only (Shauri 2019). In Burundi, a very senior faith leader reported with amazement that after the Inter-Religious Council’s awareness creation, he was welcomed by community members of an opposing political party. Not only did he set foot into an opposition stronghold, where he never would have dared venture before, but he also stayed there for many hours, engaging in dialogues and conversations with young people from different political parties who engaged him without hostility.

WALKING A THIN LINE

Faith to Action Network is walking a thin line in many ways. It is a permanent balancing act between a secular world view of SDGs and human rights, and faith world views. During its recent interfaith dialogues in Southern Africa, a participant requested Christian faith leaders to edit a Bible quote because it was not inclusive enough. A participating Bishop explained that sacred scriptures could not be amended arbitrarily. Instead,

they engaged in a dialogue and jointly selected a text that both felt happy with: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3: 28). The resulting consensus document caused uproar and Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano received letters and messages from all corners. One critique found that it was using binary language; another critique said that it was going too far. A way of bridging differences is to focus on seeking practical solutions. This can be illustrated by quotes from Johannesburg dialogues, which involved faith participants from all backgrounds, men, women, conservative, progressive etc.: “Instead of punishments, girls who fall pregnant need love, solidarity and compassion”, “The church must be more understanding and supportive to girls who get pregnant. For example, it is known that to pursue education many poor girls engage in transactional sex.” “We are talking about practical things that are happening. While we encourage abstinence, if this is not possible, they should use condoms.” And “as women, we need to move away from a point of view where men are always right”.

Faith to Action Network navigates different views on how change ought to be achieved. Within network membership, the authors identify both ‘activist’ institutions and ‘incremental change’ institutions. Activists find it important to take clear positions and force closed doors. Their sit-ins, marches and manifestoes cause an uproar. They are revolutionaries who do not fear the sacredness of religious doctrine. Defenders of a cautious approach, want to engage in an incremental approach. While they see themselves as schmoozing decision-makers, trying to gain small concessions, others perceive them as co-opted by power-holders, perpetuating unjust systemic structures. For Faith to Action Network’s Chief Executive Officer Peter Munene, “this is a long journey. In this journey some might fall off, others will do leaps and others will do small steps, while others will not move at all. Everybody is welcome.”⁴ What is important is to understand that the faith environment is extremely dynamic. What seemed true a few years ago, does not necessarily reflect today’s situation. An assessment of faith groups in one country does not hold for a faith group of the same religion in a different country. Many studies point out that one needs nuanced understandings (Wilkinson et al. 2019). The authors of this chapter emphasize that it is about negotiating practical solutions without a race to the lowest common denominator.

⁴ Peter Munene face to face interview.

This balancing act is also about navigating different interests and needs while staying relevant and truthful to its founding act. Internally, there are faith organisations' perspectives with their expectations. However, faith organisations have not yet fully lived up to their original aim of developing a platform fully owned and driven by themselves. Only very few have paid membership fees, and a handful has made larger financial contributions. The network is mainly bankrolled by Northern donor institutions who include foreign governments and philanthropies with their own set of interests and policies. The network secretariat needs to avoid falling into the trap of being utilised as a conduit to reaching faith organisations. The sole suspicion of utilising members to rubberstamp Northern blueprint policies would destroy trust within and of the network. Thankfully, trust and credibility have emerged over time. The enduring success of this network is the result of many enthusiasts who have contributed their brick to the edifice. Of course, the edifice has many gaps. It is indeed difficult to ensure equal participation to hugely diverse members. Some of them are well resourced, well skilled. Others remain institutionally weak.

CONCLUSION: STARTING FROM WHERE THERE'S AGREEMENT

There is a lot of disagreement among faith actors on issues articulated within the SDGs. There is also a lot of disagreement between faith actors and non-faith actors. Faith to Action Network believes that too much attention is given to those voices that propagate disagreement, and insufficient space is given to voices that seek agreement and constructive engagement. Faith to Action Network would like to turn around the question posed at the beginning by the United Nations Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief. It is not a question of faith OR human rights OR SDGs. Rather it is about faith AND human rights AND SDGs. This is where the network is positioned. Starting from where there is an agreement, it seeks to tiptoe into uncharted grounds, amplifying and elevating constructive voices, walking a thin line between different interests. This is a permanent balancing act that helps ensure "that perceived differences do not impede or detract from wider, constructive religious engagement" (Marshall 2017).

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