

Responding to pandemics: peer-to-peer learning with the #Faith4Rights toolkit

Ibrahim Salama¹ and Michael Wiener²

LEVERAGING FAITH FOR RIGHTS DURING THE PANDEMIC

The new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) poses specific challenges for persons belonging to religious or belief minorities. Many of them have difficulties in accessing adequate health care or face stigma, discrimination and hate speech against minorities. COVID-19 also has a gendered impact with exacerbated problems for women and girls. Faith actors can play an important transformative role, especially in the COVID-19 context, and their collaboration with other civil society actors is key for addressing the pandemic-related challenges and for “building back better”.

The #Faith4Rights toolkit, which has been launched and piloted online in 2020, is particularly suited for online interaction among faith communities and minority groups because digital engagement is far more inclusive than traditional in-person consultative patterns. The #Faith4Rights toolkit includes various COVID-related peer-to-peer learning exercises in its modules as well as a practical case study in <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/faith4rights-toolkit.pdf>. This innovative methodology does not only raise awareness of discrimination against minorities, women and girls but it also offers a toolbox for identifying practical remedies through exchanges of practices that aspire for socio-cultural change in a sustainable manner.

The #Faith4Rights toolkit was drafted and refined over two years by faith-based and civil society actors, UN special rapporteurs and members of human rights treaty bodies at workshops that were convened by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the campus of Salève in Collonges, France.³ The participants stressed in the Collonges Declaration that the toolkit “is a prototype suggested for faith actors, academic institutions and training experts, to be further enriched and adapted to the various inter-faith engagement contexts”.⁴ The toolkit offers peer-to-peer learning modules to explore the relationship between religions, beliefs and human rights by stimulating an interdisciplinary discussion in relation to the 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights”.⁵ This methodology serves a triple purpose: (1) engaging to ensure ownership, (2) thinking critically to face new challenges, and (3) reinforcing the mutual enhancement between faith and rights. The toolkit is a living document, which is open for adaptation by facilitators in order to tailor the modules to the specific context of the participants and it has already been enriched through a dozen updates during its first year of piloting in 2020.

This approach has also allowed reacting swiftly to the advent of COVID-19 by including in the #Faith4Rights toolkit concrete ideas for peer-to-peer learning exercises on responding to pandemics, including a case study composed on the basis of real situations of negative stereotyping of religious minorities and COVID-related hate speech instances. Such learning through sharing of

¹ Dr. Ibrahim Salama is Chief of the Human Rights Treaties Branch at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), where he also leads the “Faith for Rights” programme. Previously he headed the UN secretariat for the preparatory process of the 2009 United Nations World Conference Against Racism (Durban Review Conference), was independent expert of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, and was elected Chairperson of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Right to Development.

² Dr. Michael Wiener has been working since 2006 at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. He was also part of the core team organizing the expert workshops that led to the adoption of the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. Since 2017, he has been working on the design and implementation of the Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights”.

³ See <https://news.eud.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2019-12-23/faith-for-right/>

⁴ #Faith4Rights toolkit, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/faith4rights-toolkit.pdf>, p. 4.

⁵ Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights”, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/Faith4Rights.pdf>

experiences is also amplified by inspiring examples of artistic expressions that have been regularly added to the toolkit. This paper will provide a brief overview of COVID-related exercises suggested in the toolkit concerning women, girls and gender equality (module 5), minority rights (module 6), ethical and spiritual leverage (module 16), research, documentation and exchange (module 17) and a hypothetical case to debate on an epidemic (annex G).

These modules aim at stimulating exchanges among different actors to “inspire interdisciplinary research on questions related to faith and rights”⁶ and to support a “long overdue cross-disciplinary reflection on the deep, and mutually enriching, connections between religions and human rights”.⁷ The optimal benefit from the #Faith4Rights toolkit and its regularly updated 18 modules depends on the quality of moderation/facilitation of its peer-to-peer learning exercises. The task of a facilitator of such peer-to-peer learning events may be quite daunting because he or she needs to bring the participants together and stimulate true learning from each other. This cannot be achieved in a top-down manner but rather requires carefully listening to each other, on an equal footing, and trying to learn from all participants’ experiences. Raising the right questions in a sensible manner and at the right moment of the flow of the dialogue is a prerequisite for finding their answers. The idea is precisely to frame and guide a free but informed debate, which may be also heated at times. What the #Faith4Rights toolkit tries to achieve is precisely to empower the facilitator and all participants to constructively handle any “hot potatoe” issues rather than avoiding them. These include gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as violence and political manipulation in the name of religion. It is obvious that facilitators of debates on these complex issues, particularly in tension zones among different faith communities, require skills and preparation, for which the #Faith4Rights toolkit offers ideas and support.

WOMEN, GIRLS AND GENDER EQUALITY

Module 5 of the toolkit mirrors commitment V of the “Faith for Rights” framework, which pledges to ensure non-discrimination and gender equality by revisiting those religious understandings and interpretations that appear to perpetuate gender inequality and harmful stereotypes or even condone gender-based violence. With regard to the various negative effects of COVID-19 on gender equality, the toolkit provides the facilitator of a peer-to-peer exchange with several questions: What are the most challenging consequences of the COVID-19 crises in the participant’s areas of work? How do they particularly affect girls and women? What are the areas of action where faith leaders believe they have the highest chance to make a difference in facing these challenges? What promising practices can they share in this respect? What elements of the #Faith4Rights toolkit could be of practical utility in their work? What support or preparation would they feel necessary for them to use this tool in an optimal manner?

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) already in April 2020 published its *Call for joint action in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic*, referring to its “peer-to-peer learning webinars, in collaboration with Religions for Peace and other partners to explore how various faith communities can scale up collaboration around the diverse challenges posed by COVID-19 with a human rights-based approach with respect to women and girls. These webinars will use the #Faith4Rights toolkit as a resource.”⁸ Held within the CEDAW Knowledge Hub Initiative, the webinars on confronting COVID-19 from the prism of faith, gender and human rights⁹ as well as on keeping the faith in times of hate¹⁰ are available online as sources of inspiration for facilitators and participants. One of the learning objectives of module 5

⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24531&LangID=E>

⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21451&LangID=E>

⁸ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/Statements/CEDAW_statement_COVID-19_final.doc

⁹ https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=635014984024247&ref=watch_permalink

¹⁰ https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=598898111012437&ref=watch_permalink

is that participants reflect on the gendered impact of the coronavirus pandemic and explore how they can collaborate with all relevant civil society actors to address the diverse challenges, especially for women and girls.

MINORITY RIGHTS

Commitment VI on “Faith for Rights” pledges to stand up for the rights of all persons belonging to minorities and to defend their freedom of religion or belief as well as their right to participate equally and effectively in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life, as recognized by international human rights law, as a minimum standard of solidarity among all believers.

Already in March 2020, the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Fernand de Varennes, flagged that “The coronavirus outbreak endangers the health of all of us, with no distinction as to language, religion or ethnicity. But some are more vulnerable than others.”¹¹ And the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, expressed extreme concerns “that certain religious leaders and politicians continue to exploit the challenging times during this pandemic to spread hatred against Jews and other minorities”.¹² He also called all religious leaders and faith actors to combat incitement to hatred, noting that “Resolution 16/18, United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, Rabat Plan of Action, #Faith4Rights toolkit, Fez Plan of action and UNESCO’s programme to prevent violent extremism through education are some useful tools for such engagement and education”.¹³

With regard to responding to pandemics, the #Faith4Rights toolkit suggests that the facilitator might ask the participants how religious leaders could promote the dissemination of accurate, evidence-based health and scientific information on COVID-19. How could they draw on language from within their faith traditions to promote positive messages that strengthen the protection of universal human rights and affirm the dignity of all people, the need to protect and care of the vulnerable, and inspire hope and resilience in those affected by COVID-19 and related hate speech?

Furthermore, the #Faith4Rights toolkit facilitates access to related UN standards and guidance on new challenges, particularly in their faith-related dimensions. For example, the UN Human Rights Committee stressed in April 2020 that States cannot “tolerate, even in situations of emergency, the advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that would constitute incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, and they must take steps to ensure that public discourse in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic does not constitute advocacy and incitement against specific marginalized or vulnerable groups, including minorities and foreigner nationals.”¹⁴ In addition, the UN Network on Racial Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities noted that “religious leaders have a crucial role to play in speaking out firmly and promptly against intolerance, discriminatory stereotyping and instances of hate speech. Their actions or inactions can have lasting impacts on overall efforts at ensuring that the pandemic does not deepen inequalities and discrimination.”¹⁵ The #Faith4Rights toolkit is also referenced in the checklist,¹⁶ which the UN Network designed in December 2020 to strengthen work in country to combat racial discrimination and advance minority rights, including in developing COVID-19 response and recovery plans.

¹¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25757&LangID=E>

¹² <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25800&LangID=E>

¹³ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25814&LangID=E>

¹⁴ <https://undocs.org/CCPR/C/128/2>

¹⁵ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Minorities/UN_Network_Racial_Discrimination_Minorities_COVID.pdf

¹⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Minorities/AnnotatedChecklist.docx>

ETHICAL AND SPIRITUAL LEVERAGE

Commitment XVI on “Faith for Rights” pledges to leverage the spiritual and moral weight of religions and beliefs with the aim of strengthening the protection of universal human rights and developing preventative strategies adapted to the local contexts and benefitting from the potential support of relevant United Nations entities. This commitment was taken up by Religions for Peace in its *Statement on Coronavirus Crisis*, published in March 2020: “Our core responsibility as faith actors is to translate ethical values into concrete actions. A compelling way to do this is to promote human rights, fraternity and solidarity through the “Faith for Rights” framework. Beyond religious institutions and faith leaders, such a joint approach to face the current health crisis – and its severe economic and social implications – is also an individual responsibility. The “Faith for Rights” framework and its 18 commitments reach out to individual theistic, non-theistic, atheistic or other believers in all regions of the world to enhance cohesive, peaceful and respectful societies on the basis of a common action-oriented platform. To fulfil this responsibility of believers, in this broad definition of religion or belief, we encourage faith actors to use the online #Faith4Rights toolkit.”¹⁷

Linked to this statement by Religions for Peace, the toolkit suggests several questions that facilitators may ask participants in peer-to-peer learning events, for example how to conceive a project that alleviates any negative consequences in their local context? What are these consequences and where are the entry points in the 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights” to these issues? What is the specific role that faith actors can play in this respect in order to complement rather than duplicate the contributions of other actors? Which practices in the religious sphere could either prevent diseases or increase the risk of their propagation? What are the lessons learned that may lead to preventive action by the participants who could integrate this in their own work?

The toolkit also points the facilitator to the World Health Organization’s interim guidance of April 2020 on practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19.¹⁸ Furthermore, at the virtual consultation for the *Global Pledge for Action by Religious Actors and Faith-Based Organizations to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic in Collaboration with the UN*,¹⁹ the High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that “We need your far-sighted leadership; your sense of principle; and your voices of authority and concern to combat these hateful divisions. The struggle for equality and justice is at the heart of the human rights agenda, and at the heart of the UN’s work.”²⁰ As a concrete follow-up to the Global Pledge for Action, OHCHR – together with the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and the Office of the Special Advisor on Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG) – have been organizing a series of monthly webinars on topics where the role of faith actors is particularly influential, such as gender equality, hate speech, religious sites, minorities, atrocity crimes and interfaith dialogue.²¹ Aligning the efforts of these three UN entities in partnership with faith-based actors on a specific peer-to-peer learning program is a major shift from the traditional top-down approaches to a genuine recognition of what faith actors have to offer and what the United Nations can learn from their action and wisdom.

Shifting from the classical top-down approach to a peer-to-peer learning mode does not negate the importance of guidance from high-level religious authorities. Both tracks indeed complement each other. Leadership is always of the essence. The document on Human Fraternity for world peace and living together, signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in

¹⁷ <https://rfp.org/statement-by-religions-for-peace-on-coronavirus-crisis/>

¹⁸ <https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-covid-19>

¹⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/GlobalPledgeAction.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25909&LangID=E>

²¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/GlobalPledgeActionConcept.pdf>

February 2019, is a case in point. The two spiritual dignitaries “resolutely declare that religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood.”²² The Catholic Church and Al-Azhar also “pledge to make known the principles contained in this Declaration at all regional and international levels, while requesting that these principles be translated into policies, decisions, legislative texts, courses of study and materials to be circulated.”

Commenting on it from a human rights perspective, a statement on behalf of OHCHR indicated that the document on Human Fraternity resonates in many ways with the “Faith for Rights” framework on the role and responsibilities of religious actors. Inter- and intra-religious engagement can be a healing tool of reconciliation and peacebuilding in people’s hearts and minds. Such engagement should lead to sustainable change on the ground. Human rights tools provide useful peer-to-peer learning opportunities that faith actors can seize and enrich.²³

RESEARCH, DOCUMENTATION AND EXCHANGE

Module 17 of the #Faith4Rights toolkit refers to a panel discussion on multi-stakeholder action to address COVID-19, during which High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet stressed the importance of exchanging experiences and creating sustainable partnerships, which she underlined with a captivating example of interfaith collaboration: “The current crisis is one of public health that requires awareness, compassion and solidarity; faith actors are uniquely well placed to promote these values that are more needed than ever. And I think that such actions are particularly compelling if various faith actors join their hands and hearts in an interfaith manner. Let me give you a recent example of such interfaith support: A Lutheran church in Berlin has hosted Muslim worshippers who were unable to take part in Friday prayers at their mosque because of social distancing rules. So the Imam led prayers in German and Arabic, stressing that the pandemic has brought people together. The church’s pastor was moved by the Muslim call to prayer in the church and she said that ‘we have the same concerns and we want to learn from you. And it is beautiful to feel that way about each other.’ I would like to emphasize the powerful image of a male imam and a female pastor praying together and acting in solidarity.”²⁴

In search of such inspiring grass-roots experiences, OHCHR has been conducting peer-to-peer learning events, including civil servants in Nigeria (with the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief), faith-based and humanitarian actors in Denmark, South Asia and globally with Religions for Peace, with academic institutions (Oxford University, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and University of Pretoria) and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and students from more than 50 countries (with UNICRI and OSAPG). In all these webinars, the #Faith4Rights toolkit has been used, notably its exercises related to COVID-19. One key take-away of these webinars has been the need to improve both the religious literacy of human rights actors and the human rights literacy of faith actors.

It has been particularly useful to discuss a hypothetical case study²⁵, which is based on real-life elements, exemplifying the role and responsibilities of the State and religious leaders during an epidemic. In this scenario, followers of A-Religion, which is a religious minority community in the fictitious State of Itneconni, face discrimination through the Prime Minister’s emergency order to curb the spread of the infectious virus called ANOROC-20 as well as hate speech broadcasted via public television from the religious leader of B-Religion which constitutes the vast majority of

²² http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lSQ5KVDqz0&t=5m7s>

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dlypCBxj2Gg&t=74m42s>

²⁵ #Faith4Rights toolkit, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/faith4rights-toolkit.pdf>, scenario G, p. 96.

Itneconni's religious demography. While the scenario was designed as a hypothetical case study, one participant during a peer-to-peer learning event asked why the #Faith4Rights toolkit had invented some funny names for the states and religions in this scenario, whereas a similar case had actually happened in the participant's district. This real-life feedback illustrates the importance of peer-to-peer learning between civil servants, faith-based actors and human rights mechanisms in order to prevent any overreach of extraordinary measures as well as to safeguard human rights and civic space for everyone.

This may also fulfil the long-term transformative commitment XVII on "Faith for Rights" which aims at the "exchange of practices, mutual capacity enhancement and regular activities of skills updating for religious and spiritual preachers, teachers and instructors, notably in areas of communication, religious or belief minorities, inter-community mediation, conflict resolution, early detection of communal tensions and remedial techniques. In this vain, we shall explore means of developing sustained partnerships with specialised academic institutions so as to promote interdisciplinary research on specific questions related to faith and rights and to benefit from their outcomes that could feed into the programs and tools of our coalition on Faith for Rights."

Ultimately, both movements inherited a limited reciprocal literacy from the decades-long separation between religion and human rights. The only alternative to destructive confrontation or immobility is better understanding both "faith" and "rights" through research, training and action-oriented dialogue among peers. This should be based on knowledge and respect, which requires time, trust and sound methodology. This is also the rationale and philosophy of the #Faith4Rights toolkit, which stresses that "Faith and rights should be mutually reinforcing spheres". This overarching aim resonates well with a famous quote by Max Planck, whose discovery of energy quanta won him the Nobel Prize in Physics: "If you change the way you look at things, things you look at change"²⁶.

²⁶ See Joachim P. Sturmberg, "If You Change the Way You Look at Things, Things You Look at Change. Max Planck's Challenge for Health, Health Care, and the Healthcare System", in: J. Sturmberg (ed) *Embracing Complexity in Health* (Springer, Cham, 2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-10940-0_1