



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals

Citizenship, Marginalities and Development: Marginalised Communities and the Sustainable Development Goals

Conference Hall, Indian Social Institute Workshop, New Delhi

December 9th 2017, 10am – 4pm

Aims of the workshop:

This workshop was the second event of a new research network funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council on the topic of religions and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), based at the University of Leeds, UK. It was organized by the Indian Social Institute in collaboration with ICSSR (Indian Council of Social Science Research, Northern Regional Centre). It sought to bring together individuals and organisations – especially Faith-Based/Civil Society Organisations (FBOs and CSOs) engaged with marginalised communities – to examine the new SDGs. The workshop had three aims:

- 1) to reflect on the nature of exclusion experienced by different sections of marginalised communities in India, its changing dynamics, and the role of faith in this;
- 2) to share the ways in which Faith-Based/Civil Society Organisations engage with these communities to reduce marginalisation;

- 3) to deliberate on levels of knowledge and understanding of the SDGs amongst faith groups and how they are utilised. To what extent were FBOs able to take part in the consultation process to decide on the SDGs and how are they interacting with state actors in their work with marginalised communities in order to achieve the SDGs?

Participants were invited from various Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and FBOs of various religious backgrounds, but due to a number of local constraints it was not possible to assemble a constituency that is representative of the full spectrum of Faith-Based Organisations in India.

Network members that were present included: Professor Emma Tomalin, University of Leeds; Dr Jörg Haustein, SOAS; Shabaana Kidy, Humanitarian Academy for Development; Dr Dereje Feyissa, Life & Peace Institute/Addis Ababa University; Dr Afework Hailu Beyene, The Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology (EGST); Professor Surinder S. Jodhka, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Paul D'Souza, Indian Social Institute

As the first of its kind, the workshop should therefore be seen as exploratory and a number of the findings below will not be representative of the whole sector and/or will need following up with further research.

Background to the workshop:

Following the expiration of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015, a new set of globally agreed development goals and indicators, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – known more broadly as Agenda 2030 – were formulated. A consultation process preceded the unveiling of the SDGs, whereby national governments and Civil Society Organisations were invited to provide input and contribute towards their formulation. They were accepted by all 193 member countries of the United Nations (UN) in 2015, with a timeframe of 15 years. At the core of Agenda 2030, is a heavy emphasis on inclusion within global development practice. Inclusion in development requires that all individuals and groups within society, particularly those that have traditionally been marginalised such as those less able, the elderly, women and – related to this research network, even religious groups – are included in development. This principle has become known as “leave no one behind”.

The SDGs are important to a wide range of stakeholders across countries of both the Global South as well as the Global North, from national governments, through to the private sector, Civil Society Organisations and Faith-Based Organisations. National governments are expected to translate these goals and targets into their national policies, to resource and implement these policies and to measure their implementation. Other non-state actors and individuals also play a significant role in ensuring the achievement of the SDGs and this research project seeks to look specifically religions and the SDGs, particularly in India and Ethiopia.

Some progress has been made in India on the implementation of the SDGs at the global and national levels since they were officially adopted on January 1st 2016. India

submitted its Voluntary National Review (VNR) report on the implementation of the SDGs at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York in July 2017.¹ As the introduction to the VNR states:

After the SDGs were adopted, the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog), the premier policy think tank of the Government of India, was assigned the responsibility of overseeing their implementation. As a part of its oversight responsibility, NITI Aayog has led the process of VNR preparation. A multi-disciplinary VNR Task Force was constituted to coordinate the review and process documentation. From the sub-national level, state and union territory governments reported on their perspectives and progress on the various programmes and initiatives. NITI Aayog also conducted a series of consultations at the national as well as sub-national levels in which state governments, local governments, Civil Society Organisations, technical experts, academics, international organizations and other stakeholders participated. The VNR Task Force has reviewed information collected from different sources, deliberated upon it and analysed and covered it extensively in this report (NITI Aayog 2017: 2).

NITI Aayog also conducted a series of technical workshops to draft the indicators for SDG monitoring in India, and the “Draft National Indicators Framework on SDGs” was made available for public consultation in March/April 2017 (2017: 30).² Civil Society Organisations have also been engaged in popularising, monitoring and advocating for the SDGs. A number of consultations were held at various places and status reports of the SDGs were published calling for a common accountability framework through the prism of the most marginalised communities in order to “leave no one behind”. However, despite positive signs that this is potentially a paradigm-shifting global developmental agenda, there are concerns regarding its reach and impact on traditionally marginalised and socially excluded communities. This includes, in particular, the Dalits, Adivasis (tribal communities), and religious minorities (especially Muslims, who face increased hate crimes and Islamophobia as a result of moves towards the far-right)³, who together continue to be the worst-hit communities in terms of exclusion from access to public goods.⁴ Poverty eradication and the reduction of inequalities are major global challenges and indispensable requirements for sustainable development. Therefore, the broad development agenda set before the

¹ NITI Aayog (2017) *Voluntary National Review Report on Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals United Nations High Level Political Forum 2017* (http://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/Final_VNR_report.pdf)

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http://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/announcements/SDG_DraftNational_Indicators8mar17.pdf?download=1

³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/india-hate-crimes-against-muslims-and-rising-islamophobia-must-be-condemned/>

⁴ Special Correspondent (2017) Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims worst off: report, *The Hindu*, <https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/dalits-adivasis-muslims-worst-off-report/article18431421.ece>

world through the SDGs cannot be achieved without a firm commitment to including such marginalised communities. The involvement of religious organisations in welfare and charitable activities has a long history in India. They play a crucial role in sustainable development. In the Indian context, which is multi-religious yet secular,⁵ some faith actors have moved out from their traditional spheres of operation (where they have focused on internal reforms and faith-based activities with their respective communities), to engage in the public sphere or the “secular sphere” – often across faith communities – with respect to the provision of education, and health and community development. This thereby fulfils a secondary aim of reducing marginalisation with a non-discriminatory humanitarian motivation.

Programme for the workshop:

10.00 – 10.45 **Interaction among participants with coffee**

10.45 – 11.45 **Introducing the theme and programme of the day:** Professor Surinder Jodhka, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)

Welcome: Fr Denzil Fernandes, Executive Director, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi

Introductory remarks: Professor Emma Tomalin, University of Leeds

The workshop was initiated by introduction of the program by Paul D’Souza, the convener of the workshop which was followed by a formal welcome of the participants

11.45 – 1.00 **Panel Discussion**

Do the SDGs provide a useful framework to tackle “sustainable development” and to reduce marginalities globally/in India? What are the opportunities and limitations for Faith-Based/Civil Society Organisations in India?

1) Fr Fredrick D’Souza (Christian perspective) – Chairperson and National Director of Caritas India

2) Swami Agniwesh (Hindu perspective)
Arya Samaj/Bandhua Mukti Morcha

3) Syeda Hameed (Muslim perspective)
[She was unable to attend and was replaced with Professor Tanweer Faizal, JNU]

4) Manoj Gorkela (Buddhist perspective)

Advocate, Supreme Court of India/International Lawyer

1.00 – 2.00 Lunch

⁵ In Indian politics “secular” refers to a situation where all religions should have equal representation and voice in the public realm, rather than a situation where religion is absent.

2.00 – 3.30 Facilitated Small Group Discussions about knowledge and understanding of the SDGs.

Activity 1: To what extent were you able to take part in the consultation process to decide the SDGs and set the indicators?

Activity 2: To what extent and in what ways are you implementing the SDGs in your work with marginalised communities, with state agencies or independently?

Activity 3: Which SDGs have you engaged with most and why?

Activity 4: What factors enable or act as barriers to the achievement of the SDGs?

The workshop was concluded by a formal vote of thanks by Paul D'Souza.

3.30 – 4.00 Tea

Opening session: introducing the theme and programme of the day

Fr Denzil Fernandes welcomed all of the participants and stressed that the workshop had come at a crucial and critical time. While religions do much good we also hear daily news stories about the way that faith underpins violence and social division. India today has much religious diversity. With a number of the world religions originating from the sub-continent, the role of religions in social and political issues continues to be of great relevance. Faith-Based Organisations play an important role in society, including with respect to the SDGs, and this opportunity to network together for a better world is much needed.

However, religion is a sensitive topic in India and Surinder Jodhka, in his opening comments, drew attention to the absence of the word “religion” in the title of the event as a deliberate strategy, which “says something by not saying something”. The choice not to include the term religion is a reflection of the fact that it is a difficult topic in Indian society and politics, not least due to increasing but longstanding communal tensions between the so-called “Hindu Right” and minority faith traditions. It is also a difficult topic for social scientists in India who have been influenced by secularist paradigms, whereby to be modern and “developed”, one has to be secular. Moreover, the only research that is done on religion in India tends to be about communal tensions between faiths, and the disruptive and violent impact of religion in public life and politics. Additionally, where social science studies in India have looked at religious identities, they tend to be understood as social categories that mark out distinct groups rather than considering the role that religious values and practices play in individual and community identities, values and practices. There is very little serious work on religion in the social sciences in India outside of this focus.

Jodhka suggested that things are changing slowly and the conference earlier in the week at JNU, also linked to the Keeping Faith in 2030 project, demonstrated there are now a number of younger scholars in particular who are interested in moving beyond the “communalism focus”.⁶ They are also asking questions about caste and how being Dalit, for instance, is not only a caste question but also a religious question, since caste is not exclusively Hindu and cuts across other traditions. The question of how inequalities are reproduced through religious practice is not just a Hindu issue.

Emma Tomalin then introduced the “Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals” network. This was formed in November 2016 and includes academic colleagues from the UK, India and Ethiopia, as well as a non-academic partner, the Humanitarian Academy for Development (HAD), an institute that is connected to the large international NGO Islamic Relief. The network seeks to look at and better understand the role that Faith-Based Organisations and local faith communities have played in the consultations for the new UN SDGs, as well as how they are beginning to implement them in their work. The project has already held a workshop in Birmingham at the HAD offices, and in addition to this workshop in Delhi a further workshop/conference will be held in Ethiopia in September 2018. A key value underpinning this network is that academics and development practitioners need to work together as they each bring different skills and experiences that, jointly, can better address the pressing problems faced by the most marginalised in our communities.

Tomalin explained that the SDGs came into being in January 2016 after several years of consultation at the international, national and local levels, involving both states and civil society. . The consultation process to decide the SDGs is said to have been the largest in the UN’s history.⁷ There is evidence to suggest that religious actors played a significantly more prominent role in consultations around the SDGs than with the MDGs, since the MDGs were decided unilaterally within the UN.⁸ Part of the focus of this network project and the workshop held in India was to identify and understand whether FBOs themselves felt that this happened – or whether the SDGs are only really being taken up and put into practice by the larger international FBOs who already engage with such frameworks and participate in global development discourses. It further sought to understand the kind of salience the SDGs have for local communities and local faith actors who are far removed from the mechanisms of the UN and other global development institutions.

Discussion of General Questions

⁶ https://jnu.ac.in/sites/default/files/current_events/CSSS_Conf2017.pdf

⁷ Liz Ford (2015) Sustainable development goals: all you need to know, *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jan/19/sustainable-development-goals-united-nations>

⁸ Felix Dodds, Ambassador David Donoghue and Jimena Leiva Roesch (2017) *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals*. London and New York: Routledge.

PANEL DISCUSSION: Fr Frederick D'Souza | Swami Agniwesh | Syeda Hameed | Manoj Gorkela

The session began by outlining a series of questions (indicated below) around religions and the SDGs, to which panellists directed their contributions.

- ***Do the SDGs provide a useful framework to tackle “sustainable development” and reducing marginalities globally/in India?***
- ***What are the opportunities and limitations for Faith-Based/Civil Society Organisations in India?***

The speakers reflected much more on the second half of the question than the first, which is perhaps not surprising since it is more reflective of the main focus of their work. The first speaker Fr Fredrick D'Souza, National Director of Caritas India, focused on the role of Caritas in disaster relief and development. He told us that the motivation and inspiration for Caritas to work on the SDGs is the Social Teaching of the Church handed down from the beginning of the faith, which emphasised the dignity of the human person – created in the image of God – as paramount and that caste or religion is secondary. He explained that he recently went to help after a cyclone in Kerala and did not go with the Bible. He stressed that he did not go to Kerala with religious teachings (i.e. as a missionary) but to respond to the dignity of the person. Although he was religious, he also has a professional role to play since Caritas is an organisation with a systematic professional approach and policies around issues such as children, gender and sexual harassment. Although he did not address the SDGs *per se*, the Caritas India website gives details of the feedback given to the draft set of national SDG indicators mentioned above,⁹ which pays greater attention to equity and inclusion than the original draft. The second speaker was Swami Agniwesh (Arya Samaj/Bandhua Mukti Morcha).¹⁰ Again he did not directly address the SDG framework but issues around religion and social justice more broadly. However, on December 15th 2017, he was hosting a world conference on the Vedas (the earliest Hindu scriptures) and told us that it would include a special session on the Veda and the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.¹¹ He did tell us though that it was his view that 2030 is too long to wait for the SDGs to be achieved. He also argued that there needed to be a deeper structural critique and transformation than International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs) were capable of. Although he identified as a Hindu, he was keen to distance himself from identifying with one religion or another since he preferred to focus on the fact that we are all human rather than members of one

⁹ <http://caritasindia.org/caritas-india-benchmarks-equity-and-inclusion-in-recommending-national-indicators-to-sdgs-to-the-mospi/>; http://caritasindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/National-indicators-suggestions_Caritas-India.pdf

¹⁰ <http://bondedlabour.org/about-us/>

¹¹ <http://www.newindianexpress.com/pti-news/2017/dec/12/vp-to-inaugurate-world-conference-on-vedas-on-dec-15-1725296.html>

religion or another. He explained that when he embraced *sanyas* (a renunciate life) he became a “world citizen”. In addition to being well known in India, Swami Agniwesh has a strong international profile from attending UN events and interfaith meetings, some having a focus on the SDGs. He was a participant in a World Food Programme initiative to “bring representatives from a range of faith-inspired NGOs and faith communities gathered at the World Food Programme’s headquarters in Rome” on June 13th 2016,¹² where statements were gathered from religious leaders and actors, including Swami Agniwesh, about achieving the goal of “Zero Hunger”.¹³

The next speaker was supposed to be Syeda Hameed, former member of the Planning Commission of India and founding member of the Muslim Women's Forum. Sadly, she was unable to attend.¹⁴ We were fortunate that Professor Tanweer Faizal, from JNU, was able to step in at short notice. He began with a critique of the SDGs for not including a holistic idea of minority rights. Both goals 10 (“Reduced Inequalities”) and 16 (“Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions”) focus on equality issues but neither went far enough in focusing on the rights of minority groups. Also, in order to measure SDG success, he argued that it is necessary to gather disaggregated data and that this needed to become a focus for the government. Whereas the MDGs were based on notions of uniformity, the SDGs allow for more contextualisation through the development of national indicators, while at the same time focusing on universality. He pointed to the ongoing debate in India over uniformity through the notion of a Uniform Civil Code (UCC), which would mean removing the differential system of personal law in India that follows religious custom rather than universality. While gender advocates were supportive of the UCC on the basis that people should be treated equally regardless of religion and culture, conservative religious groupings tended to be opposed to it. However, there was also much evidence that religion could also positively support the SDGs where they could use their trust and legitimacy in communities to bring about change (e.g. supporting polio campaigns). The final speaker was Manoj Gorkela, an Advocate/International Lawyer for the Supreme Court of India. He is a Dalit and Buddhist and has dedicated his career to representing their rights within the judicial system. Most of his speech was dedicated toward advocating the equality and public visibility of Buddhism in India and did not address specific development challenges.

WORKSHOP SESSIONS

After a joint lunch during which the steering group members held one-to-one conversations with various members on questions relating to the workshop theme, an interactive workshop session was held, during which the participants were divided into four groups, each attending four discussion activities in turns. The activities were

¹² <http://www.wfp.org/stories/drive-inter-faith-action-zero-hunger-gathers-support-wfp-event>

¹³ <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/reports/wfp284536.pdf>

<http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/reports/wfp284537.pdf>

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syeda_Saiyidain_Hameed

organised as in the Birmingham workshop earlier in the year, which will allow for some comparative reflections at the end of the project. The discussion prompts, focal questions, and main findings (with sub-points) are listed below:

ACTIVITY ONE: To what extent were you able to take part in the consultation process to decide the SDGs and around setting the indicators?

- ***How were you involved – in what capacity?***
- ***Which other types of faith actors were involved – congregation members, religious leaders, Faith-Based Organisations etc.?***
- ***How was their participation facilitated or not? What were the mechanisms, did they work?***
- ***In what ways and to what extent to you think religious perspectives were included in the formulation of the SDGs?***

From those attending the workshop, most participants were not involved in the consultation process to set the SDGs. However, it is important to note that many of the key actors on SDG practice in India were not in attendance, and this had a bearing on the findings of the workshop.

- i. A number of participants had not known that the consultation was going on.
- ii. An organisation called Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (WNTA) – meaning “don’t break your promise” – was mentioned by many participants as being the main driver of the civil society engagement with the SDG process so far. It was founded in 2004 after the World Social Forum in Mumbai and aims “to ensure that the concerns and aspirations of Dalits, Adivasis, Nomadic Tribes, Women, Children, Youth and the Differently Abled are mainstreamed across programmes, policies and development goals of the central and state governments”.¹⁵ It has been involved in the consultation to set the goals as well as the indicators afterwards.¹⁶ Today it brings together 4000 organisations to hold the government to account for its promise to bring poverty to an end. We heard that national leaders in one International Christian FBO did work with WNTA in the setting of the goals in New York but that overall, they have been more involved in the implementation part and sensitising faith partners about the SDGs. There were also networks representing Dalit people that took part in the UN consultation process (in New York, they were part of parallel session discussing all of the goals before they were set). Another International

¹⁵<http://wadanatodo.net/about-us/>; <http://wadanatodo.net/resources/>; https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkfqkNcboJQ6Rlrw_j0P0VA

¹⁶ Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (2017) Sustainable Development Goals: Agenda 2030, India 2017, a civil society report <http://wadanatodo.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Civil-society-Report-on-SDGs.pdf>;

Christian group has offices in New York and Geneva, so they were able to engage in the consultations.

Some participants had been involved in the consultations around the indicators.

- i. WNTA submitted feedback on the indicators on April 7th, 2017 based on responses gathered from civil society.
- ii. WNTA organised a number of meetings around the SDGs. On November 8th and 9th 2016, there was a “national multi-stakeholders” consultation on SDGs. Its aim was to strategise on a common accountability framework for Civil Society from the prism of the most marginalised communities. Similar discussions were held on March 21st 2017 at the Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, followed by meetings on May 5th 2017 and June 19th 2017 at National Foundation for India (NFI), India Habitat Centre, to prepare a Civil Society Report on the SDGs. WNTA released the Civil Society Report on the SDGs at a national level event in New Delhi on July 6th 2017 as well as at the side event during HLPF in New York on July 12th 2017.¹⁷
- iii. Several workshops on national indicators were held by the government and in April 2016, the government began a process of national level indicator consultations. CSOs were given a set time to get their submissions in and the meetings were organised at the UN building with no special sessions for faith groups.
- iv. Many FBOs and CSOs are keen that the goals reach marginalised groups as this is often missing in the government approach. In response to whether some marginalised groups were invited to consultation, participants told us that they were not, only organisations working with them.

The importance of pressing for the collection of disaggregated data was noted by the groups, otherwise it will not be possible to provide evidence of the extent to which the SDGs are being met with respect to marginalised groups.

We were told that the government had organised a workshop regarding data but that this had not been followed up yet. However, once/if the collection of disaggregated data was implemented, the SDGs would help fill a big data gap in India.

There is now an increasing awareness about the SDGs.

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https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/15986HLPF_2017_Side_Events.pdf

Right Track and Islamic Relief India have held 3 workshops in India on the SDGs in Muslim communities. However, these were held after the SDGs had been set.

Was there anything about faith that was reflected in their input or was it more practical?

- i. Faith leaders were not in the national level meetings, and where FBOs (e.g. World Vision) did take part in these they did so as civil society groups rather than as FBOs.
- ii. At the local level, Islamic religious language, for instance, was being used to communicate about the SDGs.
- iii. In India, religion is seen as a social category rather than about belief and theology.
- iv. The SDGs are seen as secular goals (i.e. not relating to the particularistic views of certain religions). It is important to stress this in India to avoid charges of having the hidden agenda of potentially seeking conversions.

Additional points

- One participant felt that the SDGs have a lack of focus on marginalisation despite the “leave no one behind” slogan. Some have felt that there ought to have been an SDG dedicated to marginalised groups.
- The indicators are homogenous, but the communities are heterogeneous, which may indicate a poor fit.
- Caste complicates social welfare issues. If someone converts to Christianity, then they lose their Scheduled Cast (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) status.¹⁸ Another community that loses reservation rights¹⁹ is migrants to other states. In Madhya Pradesh there are lots of migrants from Uttar Pradesh, but their SC is not recognised. In Delhi a tribal from Jarkhand receives no benefits as there are no STs there. This is not a universal system, and varies from state to state. One’s status is decided mostly by birthplace.

ACTIVITY TWO: To what extent and in what ways are you implementing the SDGs in your work with marginalised communities, with state agencies or independently?

- **How is the SDG framework influencing what you do?**

¹⁸ The Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are officially designated groups of people that have been traditionally disadvantaged in India. These comprise the lowest castes and tribal populations.

¹⁹ “Reservation” is a system of protection for SC and ST groups, wherein certain jobs, political roles and educational opportunities are made available in a bid to redress historical discrimination.

- **Is it changing how you work or are you fitting your existing priorities into it?**
- **Are you thinking about the SDG framework in different ways for the different locations that you work? If so in what ways?**

Participants said that there were certain SDGs that they were focusing on more than others, but that overall it is an intersecting framework. We heard that some groups contributed to an alternative CSO report to the UN at the High Level Meeting in July 2017 (shadow report) that was facilitated by WNTA. One participant from a Christian international FBO told us that they have mapped all of their programmes against the SDGs according to their five areas of strategic directives. They had also sent a statement about the government's draft indicators. They link all of their work to the SDGs and popularise them in communities and among stakeholders. All organisations were already doing certain activities and the SDGs have provided an approach to reframe but have not actually changed what they are doing, and therefore are not seen as an additional tool as such. But it is not possible to use them without data. Although groups might fully align with the SDGs, there were not enough resources to work on them all. Donors would like to see them translated into proposals and they are also important for reporting and monitoring. A Muslim group had been running an "abode of homeless" project and helping Rohingya refugees. Also for a decade, they have been running a civil service training programme coaching students for a civil service exam so that they can get civil society jobs. They were doing this before the SDGs were founded in 2015. Did the SDGs make a difference? They have added a motivation factor, which has given a better push for existing work. Some participants felt that while the name had changed from MDG to SDG, this hardly influenced the work that they do, although now the SDGs (and the fulfilment of them) form part of their communication strategy.

A cluster of issues that came up in discussion were around data, accountability, advocacy, motivation and rebranding. Regarding **data**, our participants emphasised that so far the government had not provided disaggregated data to monitor the SDGs but that this was going to be necessary. In terms of **accountability** participants told us on the one hand that the SDGs would enable them to engage in more effective **advocacy** as the government was taking them seriously, therefore NGOs and CSOs could use them to show how they were violated since they would give them a benchmark. They were also an important **motivational** tool. On the other hand, some asked how it was going to be possible to hold the government accountable since civil society was shrinking and the central government had devolved the responsibility for implementing and monitoring the SDGs to state governments (albeit giving them more money). Some states already had their own action plans and were carrying out reporting and monitoring. Very few participants said that they were not using the SDG language and most were instead **re-branding** their work in these terms, the "SDGs have given a new name to the work we do" but with "no change to our actual work".

ACTIVITYTHREE: Which SDGs have you engaged with most and why? Which ones present difficulties for religious actors?

In this group discussion activity, participants were asked to identify (by placing stickers on an SDG poster), which three SDGs their organisation prioritises the most, and which three it prioritised the least. In addition, the participants were asked to identify the SDGs (up to three) they found most challenging for religious actors to engage with and why. The results of this exercise (votes per SDG) are tabulated here.

SDG No.	Title	Most Important	Least Important	Most Challenging For Religions
1	No Poverty	6	0	0
2	Zero Hunger	3	0	1
3	Good Health and Well-Being	2	1	0
4	Quality Education	9	0	1
5	Gender Equality	6	0	6
6	Clean Water and Sanitation	1	0	0
7	Affordable and Clean Energy	0	5	0
8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	3	0	2
9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	0	6	1
10	Reduced Inequalities	2	0	0
11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	0	4	1
12	Responsible Consumption and Production	0	3	1
13	Climate Action	0	3	0
14	Life Below Water	0	11	0
15	Life on Land	1	0	0
16	Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	5	0	5
17	Partnership for the Goals	2	0	3

During our discussion, participants raised a number of interesting points. Most participants explained that they select their areas of work in accordance with their constituents' most pressing needs and their organisations' vision and plan, rather than the SDG framework. However, the SDG framework was seen as beneficial in multiple respects: ***it offers a way to connect their local initiatives to the international development discourse, emphasises quality over mere existence***

of certain works (e.g. quality of education), and provides benchmarks (targets) by which the work could be assessed under professional criteria. Others found the SDG framework helpful in communicating their work to supporters and donors, for example in producing brochures for selected goals and showcasing their work towards achieving this goal. Participants regularly emphasised that the SDG framework fits well with their work and concepts, and all accounted for the reasons they prioritised certain SDGs over others. Some also felt that the SDG framework was superior to the older MDG framework due to its broad approach. That said, some SDGs, such as SDG 12 which focuses on “Responsible Consumption” were not seen as particularly fitting to the Indian non-governmental development context, which is still very much focused on basic needs.

The question of which SDGs might be more problematic for religions sparked interesting discussions in all groups. All participants emphasised that there was no contrast between the SDGs and their doctrinal/theological frameworks, quite the opposite, they were very seen as very compatible to religious aspirations for a more just society. Instead, where tensions persisted, they were seen as mainly cultural or political, rather than doctrinal. On the level of religious identity and relations between religious communities, the work on some SDGs, such as 16 (“Peace & Justice”) and 17 (“Partnership for the Goals”) were seen as difficult on account of religious particularism. Goal 4 (“Quality Education”) was also seen as problematic by some, due to the different ways religious communities taught some essential subjects, such as history. Goal 5 (“Gender Equality”) was also seen as presenting some challenges to religious communities due to what some participants called “traditional” understanding of gender roles and inequality. The same was said to be true in relation to goal 10 (“Reduced Inequalities”) with reference to caste. However, in both cases, participants emphasised that it was hard to distinguish between social norms, traditions, ethnic identity, and religious beliefs, implying that there was no simple religious solution to these issues in implementing the affected SDGs.

ACTIVITY FOUR: What are the enablers, barriers and next steps towards effective engagement?

The purpose of this exercise was to gather observations on key enablers and crucial barriers to the implementation of the SDGs, specifically with regard to the work of Faith-Based Organisations.

Before listing various enablers and barriers, the groups were asked to define what they understood by these terms. Most groups saw enablers as factors contributing to a conducive environment for implementing development goals, while barriers were understood as obstacles and policies that generated a restrictive environment for development.

The enablers mentioned for implementing the SDGs can be sorted in two categories:

1. Enablers originating from the SDG process/framework:

- The SDG framework provides networks and other opportunities to collaborate and increase the impact of individual FBOs.
 - The SDG framework helps align the various purposes and goals of FBOs toward a common strategy and vision in development.
 - Working within the international framework of the SDGs gives FBOs additional credibility and helps them participate in global conversations, which is a motivating factor.
 - The SDG process and framework may help unlock additional funding sources.
2. Enablers originating from the Faith-Based Organisations:
- FBOs with a well organised approach, clear structure, and appropriate skillset are better enabled to implement the SDGs.
 - The contacts with government bodies and capacity to influence them is also important in the Indian context. Many CBOs are started by retired bureaucrats, who can utilise existing connections in government and professional contacts.
 - FBOs are important in providing the motivation, framework and resources for engaging with sustainable development.
 - A commonly shared faith helps to override narrow national considerations and boundaries and provides a wider platform to engage in international conversations.

The barriers can be grouped into three categories:

1. Barriers related to the SDG process:
- There is a lack of awareness and knowledge to overcome when it comes to the SDGs, as there have been few local opportunities that are necessary to understand and engage with this framework.
 - The SDGs are designed to work from a macro to a micro level, but this does not always work as it tends to exclude local initiative and input. This gives international NGOs greater leverage.
 - The lack of sufficient disaggregated development data in India makes it difficult to measure progress in attaining the SDGs. Identifying those who really need help is just as challenging within the SDG framework.
 - The SDGs have merely reformulated already existing development goals and practices. The various challenges and goals therefore remain the same; it is only a new language.

- The SDGs may be seen as not doing enough to tackle the divide that sometimes exists between countries of the Global North and South. For example, work on addressing climate change which requires a reduction in emissions in order to achieve global goals has focused on emissions of countries of the Global South and North though with differentiated responsibilities. Since countries of the Global North have historically been the highest emitters, there are acute sensitivities surrounding targets for low income countries that have neither had their period of development, nor have contributed most significantly to the current state of affairs.
2. Barriers emanating from the wider political and social context:
- Much of the success of the SDG implementation depends on the political will of the government. Compatible policies are easily produced, but practical implementation is often lacking.
 - Marginalisation of certain groups and castes still is the most important factor in creating social barriers and impacts on the implementation of the SDGs.
 - Access to financing is often harder for smaller organisations, who need to adjust their language and structures to make them fit with funding opportunities.
 - There is a shrinking space for civil society actors and FBOs in India, which restricts their capacity to influence policy change. FBOs in particular are not recognised by the government as equal partners in implementing the SDGs.
 - The representation of FBOs is not sufficiently inclusive at all levels, as the process of selecting participating organisations is quite political. At the local level, there is no prominent structure or process to facilitate the participation, engagement, or dialogue with and between FBOs.
 - The political environment is more directed toward corporate actors, but rather disabling for FBOs.
3. Barriers related to specific religious challenges:
- Some FBOs and religious communities resist change.
 - Various faiths may disagree in their assessment of certain SDG-relevant aspects such as gender relations or other factors of human existence.

One group noticed that barriers can also be reformulated as specific development challenges and therefore become enablers for a more targeted implementation of the SDGs. Overall, it became clear that the various structural and political enablers and

barriers were of much greater concern to the FBO participants than specific religious doctrines or practices.

Final session

The final session of the day was comprised of an opportunity for participants to provide feedback. They emphasised the importance of gathering like this, the usefulness of the interactive elements, and a desire to keep networking on this theme going forward.

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