



Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals

Findings and Recommendations

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



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Executive Summary

Religion is a major cultural, social, political, and economic factor in many official development assistance (ODA) recipient countries. Understanding religious dynamics and the role of faith communities and actors is crucial for sustainable development. While faith communities have endured and thrived the world over, a wave of modernist, secular social change has dominated development practice and discourse from the second half of the 20th century onwards. It had been previously anticipated by a number of scholars, development practitioners and others that religion would become outdated and eventually obsolete. However, faith communities, actors and assets continue to occupy a critical space. Accordingly, development discourse and practice today acknowledges the significant role that religion plays in this area. Greater portions of development aid are now channelled via faith-based initiatives/organisations, and religion is increasingly recognised as a resource for – rather than as an obstacle to – development. Many faith actors have also been involved in shaping development policy as well as committing to the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), codified by the UN.

This policy paper is based upon findings from a research project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) titled ‘Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals’. Its main recommendations are summarised below.

Summary of Recommendations:

1. Faith-actors should not be brought in solely as ‘religious voices’ but as development partners like all others.
2. Members of NGOs and governments should increase their religious literacy, not only in terms of the history, teachings and practices of different world religions, but also with respect to how religion actually manifests in diverse settings.
3. Identifying which faith actors to engage with according to their relative background and expertise, and on what issues, should be given careful consideration.
4. Perceived tensions between certain SDG goals or targets and religious values should be approached by recognising that faith actors can be important mediators for gaining a more specific understanding of such tensions and finding ways of addressing them.
5. In building partnerships with faith actors, it is important that those actors are listened to and included on their terms rather than being instrumentalised to achieve pre-defined development goals.
6. More investment is needed to spread knowledge about the SDG agenda to local faith actors to enable them to participate in the international conversation and mobilise local resources for the sustainable development agenda.

Objectives

Religion is a major cultural, social, political, and economic factor in many official development assistance (ODA) recipient countries. Understanding religious dynamics and the role of faith communities and actors is crucial for sustainable development. While faith communities have endured and thrived the world over, a wave of modernist, secular social change has dominated development practice and discourse from the second half of the 20th century onwards. It had been previously anticipated by a number of scholars, development practitioners and others that religion would become outdated and eventually obsolete. However, faith communities, actors and assets continue to occupy critical space. Accordingly, development discourse and practice today acknowledges the significant role that religion plays in this area. Greater portions of development aid are now channelled via faith-based initiatives or organisations, and religion is increasingly recognised as a resource for – rather than as an obstacle to – development.

The Global Religious Landscape

‘Worldwide, more than eight-in-ten people identify with a religious group. A comprehensive demographic study of more than 230 countries and territories conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life estimates that there are 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe, representing 84% of the 2010 world population of 6.9 billion’.²

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The SDGs comprise 17 goals with 169 targets that were signed by the 193 UN member states in 2015. They have replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which ran from 2000-2015, and are also known as ‘Agenda 2030’.

Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs are universal and contain goals and targets for countries in both the Global North and the Global South.

Many faith actors have also been involved in shaping development policy. Initially, this was done by adopting and heralding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), whereas now, many faith actors have committed to achieving the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While the MDGs were set unilaterally within the United Nations (UN), with little to no consultation with civil society, the SDGs were arrived at following a wide-reaching negotiation process both within the UN, as well as through the largest civil society consultation held in its history. This was made possible via the www.worldwewant2015.org

website and it was documented that over seven million people took part in the survey up to the end of 2014.³ The SDGs seek to ensure a more grassroots and locally owned type of development based on the recognition that ‘local people’ are better placed to both understand and respond to development challenges. Since local people are often comprised of faith communities, engaging them and acknowledging the importance of their role is rendered even more critical to the discussion on sustainable development.

‘Leave no-one behind’

A central commitment of the SDGs is to make sure that no-one is ‘left behind’. This seeks to support a more inclusive approach to development that ensures the poorest and most marginalised do not lose out.

During the both the consultation process and the implementation phase, there has been a coordinated effort from within the UN to engage civil society actors, including those who are faith-based. The UN Interagency Task Force on Engaging Religion for Sustainable Development plays a leading role in this engagement. Following the SDG consultation process, which began after the Rio+20 conference in 2012 and re-established ‘the sustainable development narrative at

the global level',⁴ states, civil society, and the private sector have been increasingly involved in adopting approaches and methods aimed at implementing the goals. For example, many civil society actors participate in the annual UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development meetings, as well as the Voluntary National Report (VNR) process. States are also carrying out country level consultations to decide national indicators for the SDGs and putting in place initiatives to collect relevant data in order to measure progress.

This policy paper is based upon findings from a research network funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), titled 'Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals'.⁵ Considering the increased attention that has been paid to the collaboration between faith actors and secular global development actors over the past decade or so,⁶ the authors wanted to better understand the role that faith actors have played in the SDG process. This project has involved three country conferences and stakeholder workshops (Birmingham in February 2017, New Delhi in December 2017 and Addis Ababa in September 2018) with the final conference held 12-13th February 2019 in London.

The three stakeholder workshops have brought together representatives from faith-based organisations (FBOs) with other development actors and academics who, together, have reflected upon their engagement to date with the SDG process. The data that we draw upon in this paper is formed by discussion notes taken at previous workshops along with the transcripts from ten key informant interviews.

Types of Faith Actor

The broad category of 'faith actor' extends beyond the formal faith-based organisations (FBOs) that are most visible within the global development world. We have identified the following types of faith actor:

- Large, formal international FBOs, typically with branches in the Global South (e.g. Christian Aid, Islamic Relief, Tearfund etc.). They often have strong links to the UN (e.g. special consultative status at ECOSOC) and other international processes.
- International apex bodies representing faith traditions (e.g. Anglican Communion, Vatican, World Council of Churches) with formal links to UN processes.
- Formal FBOs and networks, such as interreligious councils that have a national or regional reach, are frequently partners with government ministries and are usually located in national capitals. They may also have links to the UN and other international processes, including through their participation in worldwide religious networks.
- Smaller formal FBOs may have some transnational ties but are not necessarily linked to the UN or other international development organisations. They may be supported by religious centres in the West (e.g. churches, mosques, etc.) but any further international ties are unlikely.
- FBOs carrying out development and humanitarian work, which are small-scale and local, may be linked to local places of worship, and are less likely to have formal links to UN and other international processes. This could include parish committees or *zakat* committees. They have some organisational structure within their religious communities but they are not necessarily separate, registered organisations.
- Religious leaders are increasingly invited to participate in global and national policy debates. This is due to the perception that, in the Global South, they often hold positions of authority and trust and they are revered and listened to. Faith leaders – that may have local, national and international levels of leadership – can be valuable allies in promoting the SDGs and other development values and goals. However, certain religious views and values may also present obstacles, making understanding and respectful engagement all the more important.
- Places of worship and their congregations in the Global South may also support development and humanitarian work at a local level. Groups may spontaneously mobilise within such communities and at places of worship when there is a crisis.

The first section of this document outlines the global SDG process from its emergence after the Rio+20 Conference in 2012 and the setting of the goals in August 2015, through to its current implementation and monitoring phase. This includes an overview of how civil society actors and faith groups have been included in this process.

In the second section, we give an overview of the local conditions in Ethiopia, India and the UK and the involvement of religious actors in the implementation of the SDG framework. This information is based on input from our workshop participants and our own research.

Section three presents the main findings from our workshop discussions, which centred around the following questions:

- Were faith actors involved in the consultation to set the goals and if so, which faith actors and what has their contribution been?
- How are they beginning to interpret and implement the SDGs?
- Are there any SDGs that pose a challenge for some faith actors and why might that be?
- What role should faith *and* secular and humanitarian development actors play in mitigating such challenges?

The paper ends with a summary of main findings and a set of recommendations for governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) alike.

Religion in the Global South: The Limits of the ‘world religions paradigm’

The so-called ‘world religions paradigm’ makes assumptions about religious dynamics in the Global South:

1. The assumption that the religious practice of individuals is dictated by their religious texts is one aspect of the Western ‘world religions paradigm’. According to this paradigm, sacred texts are valued over vernacular ‘lived religion’.
2. Another aspect of the ‘world religions paradigm’ is that people can only belong to one discrete religious tradition, which may be differentiated by its religious texts and teachings. However, in many places, the boundaries between religions are often not clear-cut and people may appear to practise or belong to more than one at the same time. For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa, people often practise African Traditional Religions (ATR) alongside Christianity or Islam.
3. A final aspect of the ‘world religions paradigm’ is that it not only differentiates between religions but also between the religious and the secular. However, such a distinction between the religious and the secular is hard to find in highly religious contexts where religion permeates all aspects of their lives.

1. The SDG Framework

1a. The Emergence of the Post-2015 Agenda

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were the outcome of several years of discussion and negotiation, which began in 2012 as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were reaching their 2015 cut-off date. A mandate for the SDGs as universally applicable emerged after the Rio+20 conference in June 2012 and an intergovernmental 'Open Working Group' (OWG) was set up to deliberate and outline the goals. Parallel to this, the UN Secretary General launched a High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons to guide the discussions on the post-2015 agenda.

The SDG-OWG had 30 seats, which were shared by a group of 70 member state representatives. Its operation lasted from March 2013 to July 2014 and 17 goals and 169 targets were drafted. It was chaired by the Permanent Representatives of Hungary and Kenya and Ambassadors Csaba Körösi and Macharia Kamau. In addition to the involvement of member states, the OWG also included mechanisms for the Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS)⁷ to be consulted between March-November 2013 on 26 themes that could potentially become the focus of an SDG.⁸

1b. The Role of Civil Society Actors in the Consultation Process

While there was a role for civil society actors in the OWG consultations, it was also agreed at the Rio+20 Conference⁹ that both thematic and regional consultations would be held prior to the SDG-OWG that would feed into the negotiations. These consultations aimed to reach a wide range of stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, the private sector, media, universities, think tanks and the general public. The SDG-OWG completed its work in July 2014, and in October 2014, Ambassador David Donoghue of Ireland and Ambassador Macharia Kamau of Kenya were appointed as co-facilitators of the intergovernmental negotiations. They would finalise the post-2015 development agenda and produce the text 'Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'.¹⁰ These negotiations ran from December 2014 to August 2015 and involved all 193 member states as well as structures for input from the MGoS.

Although the SDG consultation process claimed to be the largest ever held in the UN's history, and gathered the views of a wide range of stakeholders in many different parts of the globe, there was also criticism that the consultation did not extend as far as it could have done and that the negotiations were biased in favour of state inputs. It was, however, a considerable improvement on the MDG selection process, meaning that both governments and civil society actors were likely to be more committed to the SDGs. Moreover, their global scope, applicability to all countries and their aim to directly tackle inequality made them more appealing to those in the Global South.

1c. Religions and the SDG Process in the United Nations

Faith Actors as a Distinct Stakeholder Group?

On the whole, the negotiation processes employed to decide on the SDGs considered faith actors to be civil society actors meaning that their religious identity did not make a notable difference. As one interviewee who was involved in the final negotiations told us:

‘Within the NGOs, how visible were faith groups? I’m asking myself. I honestly couldn’t say that they were that visible, that’s not to say that they weren’t there but I have a clearer sense of the faith community as it were from a couple of side events, which I addressed around that time.’

However, another interviewee warned that when faith groups are treated as a separate group of stakeholders and meetings are set up to cater for their needs and input, they can become siloed:

‘the consultations, the capacity building, the knowledge management... and the policy advocacy takes place separately’.

The UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) has been the main space within the UN where religious engagement has been nurtured. It has decades of experience of working with faith-based organisations and has several publications that explore the role of religion and culture in its work.¹¹ It has been at the forefront of efforts to mainstream considerations of religion within the UN’s agencies and was part of a new initiative beginning in 2007 (and formalised by

2009) called the UN Inter Agency Task Force (UNIATF) on Religion and Development.¹² In 2009, the ‘Guidelines for Engaging Faith-Based Organisations as Cultural Agents of Change’ was produced¹³ as have other reports on the UNIATF’s engagement with faith actors.¹⁴ More recently, this body – now known as the UN Interagency Task Force on Engaging Religion for Sustainable Development – has appeared at events and in publications concerned with bringing faith actors into the new SDG process,¹⁵ which includes an event held during the final stages of the SDG-OWG consultation process from 12th -14th May 2014 in New York titled ‘Religion and Development Post-2015’.¹⁶ The participants at this Donor-UN-FBO (DUF) Roundtable then became the nucleus of PaRD (International Partnership on Religion and Development), which formed in 2016.¹⁷

Since the SDGs were set, the UNIATF on Engaging Religion for Sustainable Development has been supporting joint activities across a number of UN agencies, as well as reporting on the different activities of these agencies.¹⁸ As part of this work, both formal FBOs linked to the UN system and local faith actors in different countries have been engaged.

Despite this progress, it appears that there was little attempt to engage faith actors as a distinct stakeholder group in the main SDG process. None of the faith actors that we consulted felt that there was space to bring in a discussion of anything ‘religious’ (e.g. relating to theology or religious beliefs) into the public-facing SDG process. Nonetheless, neither did many articulate a need to do so, preferring rather to use the SDG framework as a way to protect their rights and gain equal treatment. In our discussions in India in particular, keeping overt religious language out of the SDG process was considered important in a setting where sectarian conflict and tension is prominent.

Some opportunities did exist to take part in events and sessions that were more focused on religious engagement specifically, including those organised by the UNIATF on Engaging Religion for Sustainable Development.

Faith actors, in the same way as other civil society actors, interact in a range of forums where they use different language and ways of engaging according to the character of the other participants. While many faith actors deliberately maintain a ‘secular’ persona in their public engagement with the SDGs, they are at the same time able to ‘shift register’ and engage with local faith communities in terms of religious language and concepts where appropriate.¹⁹

2. Religions and the SDG Implementation in Ethiopia, India, and the UK

2a. Ethiopia



Image: www.et.undp.org

Ethiopia’s political vision and rhetoric are largely built around its development targets and achievements, including its stated goal of becoming a lower-middle income country by 2025. With a consistently high GDP growth of 8-10 percent in the last fifteen years, considerable foreign investment in infrastructure and a large share in international development aid, change has been rapid and noticeable since the beginning of the new millennium. Whilst this has led to considerable achievements, it has also produced new political tensions.

Ethiopia’s MDG Achievements:

- ✓ 1: To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- ✓ 2: To achieve universal primary education
- ✗ 3: To promote gender equality and empower women
- ✓ 4: To reduce child mortality
- ✗ 5: To improve maternal health
- ✓ 6: To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
- ✓ 7: To ensure environmental sustainability
- ✓ 8: To develop a global partnership for development

Ethiopia’s participation in the Millennium Development Goal process has been hailed a success, with the country achieving six out of the eight goals.²⁰

Building on this success, the country engaged actively in the SDG process. Though Ethiopia was not one of the members of the OWG, it was one of fifty countries selected to provide data input. Ethiopia was also one of the ten African countries to involved in the joint preparation of the ‘Common African Position’.²¹

The SDGs were ratified in the country via the Second Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP II 2015/16–2019/20). In 2017, the country released its first Voluntary National Review (VNR).²² By that point, preparatory work on the SDG needs and financing assessments had been completed and a national monitoring and evaluation framework had been drawn up for government approval. Seven SDGs had been selected by the government for early performance trends (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, and 14), based on existing data held by the government and the Central Statistical Agency.

Despite Ethiopia’s overall active and positive engagement with the SDG agenda, there are a number of challenges for its implementation in the country:

1. Development has remained under the central control of the ruling party, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).²³ As such, the achievements of the ‘Ethiopian developmental state’²⁴ come at the cost of stifling the private sector, severely

curtailing civil society, and encouraging corruption and rent-seeking through retaining central control over vital economic assets, such as land and natural resources.

2. The GTP II was adopted just after the signing of the Sustainable Development Goals and references the SDGs in only a very general manner.²⁵ Its ten development priorities are aimed almost exclusively at economic growth and reflect only a narrow set of the SDGs. The government insists that the GTP II is its only planning framework for implementing the SDGs, which are paired or ‘mainstreamed’ into the GTP objectives in a highly selective manner.²⁶
3. This makes the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs highly dependent on what is contained in the GTP, as the VNR shows. The data included in the VNR for various SDGs (1-5, 9, 14, 17) does not reflect the respective SDG targets; it only includes what is relevant for the GTP. It will be important to monitor future national performance indicators to see if they will encompass the wider remit of the SDGs or stay focused primarily on what is contained in the GTP priorities. The 2017 VNR’s notes on implementation suggest that the SDG indicators and reporting frameworks will be identical to those already in place for the implementation of the GTP II.

In addition to these general issues with the implementation of the SDGs in Ethiopia, a number of additional challenges arise for civil society organisations (CSOs) and FBOs in particular:

1. The Ethiopian Charities and Societies Proclamation of 2009 has severely curtailed the contribution of CSOs.²⁷ The Proclamation excludes foreign CSOs from working in human rights advocacy, while Ethiopian CSOs working in such areas may receive no more than ten percent of their income from abroad.²⁸ This has led to a massive reorientation in the civil society sector with organisations either shifting exclusively to economic development or curtailing their operations in human rights advocacy due to a lack of funds.²⁹ Moreover, the Proclamation tasks the Charities and Societies Agency with direct executive oversight over the CSO sector, determining ‘the details of charitable purposes and the public benefit by directives’.³⁰
2. Religious institutions are not counted as CSOs by the 2009 Proclamation. FBOs are thereby understood as organisations engaged in religious advocacy only; their former development work had to be re-registered as a separate CSO. While this separation clause may have been helpful in preventing the use of development contributions for religious purposes, it has also prevented FBOs from reaching their full potential in areas where religious advocacy could be beneficial in reaching development goals, such as in the elimination of harmful traditional practices, the achievement of gender equality, or the prevention of inter-religious or ethnic conflict.³¹
3. So far, there has been little opportunity for CSOs to engage actively in the SDG process. The 2017 VNR makes some vague references to involving different ‘stakeholders’ in various consultations, but provides no details about these consultations nor about who was involved. Going forward, the VNR recommends that government ministries and agencies facilitate discussions with CSOs in so-called ‘public wings’. It also recommends

the creation of ‘technical working groups’ that focus on specific targets in order to engage development partners in the implementation of the SDGs.³² Both recommendations appear to still be in the early stages.³³

With the recent political changes since the ascension of Abiy Ahmed to the office of Prime Minister in 2018, some of these parameters are bound to change. An amendment to the Charities and Societies Proclamation is currently being drafted and parts of the government have distanced themselves from the GTP II due to its setting unattainable targets.³⁴ In general, Ethiopia has seen an unprecedented opening of political space in recent months with the lifting of press restrictions, the readmission of political organisations hitherto considered ‘terrorist’ and a changing geopolitical landscape in the Horn of Africa arising from the Peace Treaty with Eritrea. The Ethiopia workshop therefore took place in a very open atmosphere that was characterised by a strong hope for meaningful change, despite some anxiety owing to recent inter-ethnic violence.³⁵

2b. India



India participated in the Millennium Development Goal process and made ‘notable progress towards reaching the MDGs’ albeit with varying levels of success across the goals.³⁶ The country has so far engaged actively in the SDG process, playing a role both in the SDG-OWG and the post-2015 intergovernmental negotiations.³⁷ India also prepared and submitted a Voluntary National Review (VNR) in 2017.³⁸ From the outset of the SDG process, the Indian state has stressed that the ‘country’s national development goals are mirrored in the SDGs [...]’. The memorable phrase *Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas*, translated as ‘Collective Effort, Inclusive Development’ and enunciated by the Prime Minister, forms the cornerstone of India’s national development agenda.

Image: http://www.bjp.org/images/jpg_budget_2016/t_2_24.02.2016.jpg

On January 1st 2015, the Government of India announced the formation of a policy think tank called NITI Aayog³⁹ (replacing the Planning Commission), which was to take responsibility for the SDGs. While NITI Aayog prepared a 15-year vision, 7-year strategy and 3-year action plan, as well as leading the process of VNR preparation, another agency in the national government – the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) – was given responsibility for formulating a draft national indicator framework that would be used to measure progress on the SDGs in India. Given the federalism of India, State Governments and Union Territories were also expected to coordinate with respect to setting the national indicators and to work towards progress at the State and Union Territory (UTs) level. However, India also has another layer of rural, local level governance in its Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs). In order to ensure the localisation of the SDGs in India, there is a programme of capacity building of the

panchayats that also involves agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The draft national indicator framework was revealed in September 2016 by MoSPI as ‘a consolidated list of possible national indicators based on the available information’.⁴⁰ Following a process of consultation to gather the input of the general public and experts, including civil society organisations, the National Indicator Framework was published in November 2018 by MoSPI.⁴¹ 306 indicators were identified and these have formed the basis of the ‘SDG India Index’ (a base line report), which was published in December 2018. From this list of 306 indicators, a total of 62 Priority Indicators were selected and, based on these, the SDG India Index score was calculated for each of its States and UTs.⁴²

INDIA'S PROGRESS TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE MILLENIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

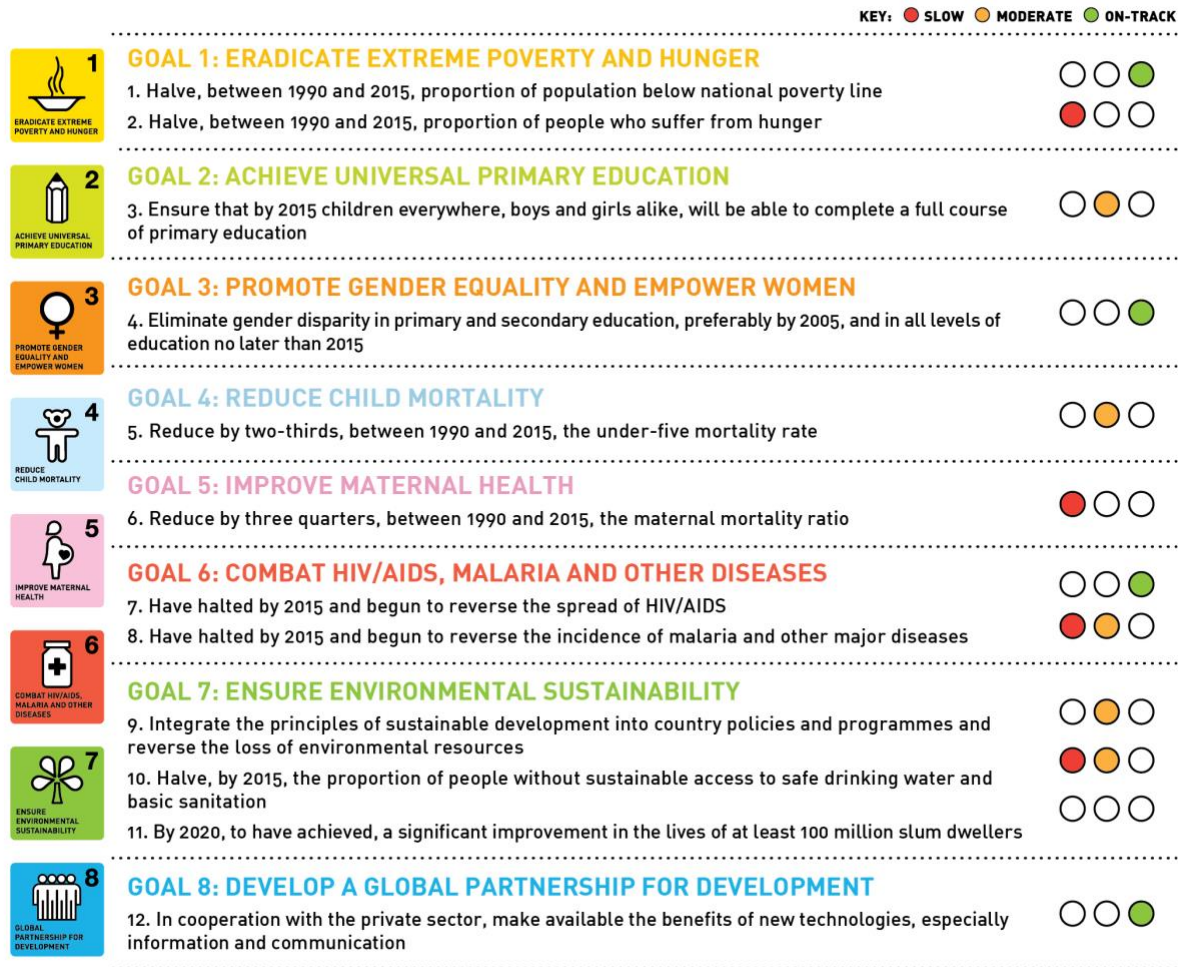


Image: <http://www.in.undp.org/content/india/en/home/post-2015/mdgoverview.html>

Despite these engagements, there are a number of challenges for the implementation of the SDG agenda in India from the side of the government.

1. NITI Aayog promises a ‘synergistic approach involving central ministries, States/Union Territories (UTs), civil society organisations, academia and business sector to achieve India’s SDG targets’.⁴³ However, coordinating these different sets of stakeholders towards this end is a mammoth task and much effort will be needed if this statement is to become a reality.
2. The 2017, the VNR also claimed that ‘while targeting economic growth, infrastructure development and industrialisation, the country’s war against poverty has become fundamentally focused on social inclusion and empowerment of the poor’.⁴⁴ This lines up with the SDG slogan to ‘leave no-one behind’. However, the civil society organisation Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (WNTA),⁴⁵ which specifically represents marginalised groups, argues that this will require indicators that can evaluate the access of marginalised and vulnerable communities to social, economic and political resources, and disaggregated data to measure progress in all dimensions of poverty.⁴⁷ While in the 2018 baseline report ‘SDG India Index’ NITI Aayog recognises the value of disaggregated data, the current index generalises across entire populations within the country.

Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (WNTA)

‘Poverty is more than lack of income or resources- it includes social discrimination and exclusion, lack of basic services, such as education, health, water and sanitation, and lack of participation in decision making. These “durable inequalities” perpetuate acute poverty, limiting the life options of historically marginalised communities... The visible fiscal and economic inequalities are undercut by gross social inequalities based on identity and social status, viz. caste, ethnicity, religion, region, age and gender’.⁴⁸

Fear Over Religious NGOs

‘Fear and scepticism over their political activism and lobbying has also pushed the current government in its brutal—and sometimes overreaching—crackdown on NGOs. Any kind of activism taken up by non-Hindu organisations is viewed as ‘meddling’ in the country’s internal affairs and deemed as a destabilising force. Rights movements, advocacy and agitation are out, while poverty-alleviation schemes are in’.⁴⁹

In addition to these general issues in the implementation the SDGs, a number of additional challenges arise for CSOs and FBOs in particular:

1. In India, ‘the legal framework is generally supportive of civil society’.⁵⁰ However, since the election of the Hindu Nationalist BJP party under the leadership of Narendra Modi in 2014, ‘the space for civil society - civic space - is increasingly being contested’.⁵¹ This has taken the form of increasing restrictions on CSOs that engage in human rights advocacy or criticise government corruption, particularly when those organisations receive funding from outside of India (subject to the Foreign Contributions Regulations Act 2010). Such groups are accused of being anti-nationalist and attempting to destabilise India.
2. CSOs/NGOs that are faith-based face additional challenges since the Modi government is particularly sensitive to those that are viewed as engaging in conversion activities. In 2017, the USA-based Christian NGO Compassion International had to cease operations in India after it was refused permission to

receive overseas funding amid reports by security agencies that it was ‘funding NGOs unregistered for religious activity’.⁵²

2c. United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is expected to have a different relationship to the SDG process than it did to the MDGs. Given the universality of the SDG framework, the SDGs ought to shape both domestic and international sustainable development activities. While the UK government is due to submit its VNR in 2019, an organisation called UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD) has already published a report called ‘Measuring up: How the UK is performing on the UN Sustainable Development Goals’.⁵³ UKSSD notes that ‘while there’s an enormous amount to celebrate, the most vulnerable people and places in our society are increasingly being left behind’.⁵⁴ The report explains that whilst DfID published ‘Leaving no one behind: Our promise’, it focused on its international work while missing ‘the importance of leaving no one behind in the UK, too’.⁵⁵ Moreover, the UK Government has so far not held any ‘discussions involving the public or stakeholders across sectors on the applicability and implications of the SDGs for domestic policy’.⁵⁶ Amongst the general public and within UK civil society (including faith actors), knowledge about the goals varies.

In the UK, USPG – United Society Partners in the Gospel – in collaboration with UKSSD, delivered a letter to the Prime Minister bearing the names of 32 representatives of faith traditions across the UK (19 November 2018). It called for the government to:

- ‘Work collaboratively with us and use the SDGs as an opportunity to build cohesion and resilience in our communities, and to ensure that the UK is able to help to resolve the challenges we share globally with the international community.
- ‘To act on its duty to enable local responses to the SDGs, including working closely with those communities of faith and belief which help form the backbone of local relationships and cohesion.
- ‘Appoint a minister for the SDGs to work with our communities of faith and belief, business and civil society to develop a coherent plan for implementing the Goals’.⁵⁷

While some faith groups in the UK will already be working in areas that have relevance for the SDGs, they may not be explicitly aligning with them. However, in addition to existing work having relevance for the SDGs, our research has demonstrated some distinct advantages to directly engaging with the SDG framework itself. This includes the benefits of raising the profile of local agendas and needs through linking them to a global framework, the potential for leveraging funding, and the distinct emphasis on overcoming marginalisation and inequality in both the Global North and the Global South.

3. Findings from Country Workshops

In conjunction with our academic conferences in each of the three countries, we conducted three stakeholder workshops in Birmingham (13th February 2017), New Delhi (9th December 2017) and Addis Ababa (21st September 2018) aimed at exploring the engagement of FBOs in the SDG process. As participation in the workshops was self-selecting, the workshop findings cannot be seen as a representative sample. However, each of the workshops assembled a broad range of organisations in terms of faiths, type, and size so that the findings provide good indications of the main themes and challenges for the FBO sector's engagement with the SDGs in all three countries. All three workshops followed the same pattern of four discussion activities around the involvement of our participants in the SDG conceptualisation and implementation.

3a. Participation in SDG Consultations

Main questions: Did you or your organisation participate in the consultation process to set the SDGs? Were you aware of the consultation process?

Main Findings:

- In all of our workshops, participants indicated that the awareness of and participation in the SDG consultation process was very low. This pertains both to global and country-level consultations.
- Where inclusion in the SDG consultation process did take place, it was rather incidental and based on personal connections or professional networks. As such, these organisations were not invited to participate from a specific faith perspective but, instead, attended in the same capacity as all other NGOs or CSOs.

Country-specific findings:

- In Ethiopia, none of the assembled organisations had participated in any kind of national or international consultation about the SDGs, with the exception of one academic who had been part of a subject-specific consultation. Others had only heard about SDG consultations through their international headquarters. Consultations with the government always revolved around the national Growth and Transformation Plan, which, as mentioned above, pays lip service to the SDGs but follows its own agenda.
- In India, our participants mostly reported that they were unaware that the consultations were going on. The national consultations in India did not reach out to faith actors, including religious leaders and organisations, and where faith actors did engage (e.g. via the civil society coordinating group Wada Na Todo Abhiyan), they did so as civil society actors. Some had given feedback to the consultation on the Draft National Indicators for the SDGs, co-ordinated by MoPSI. At the India workshop, there was a strong articulation from participants that the SDGs should be 'secular' and that this was positive. In India, 'secular' emphasises that something is relevant to all religious traditions rather than a religious perspective being absent or dismissed as unimportant. In a political climate

where participants could face accusations of proselytisation or anti-Hindu sentiment, the commitment to ‘secularism’ is an important public value.

- At the Birmingham workshop in the UK, our participants noted that there had not been a particular effort by the UN to consult FBOs and other faith actors about the SDGs. Instead those present at the workshop, who were from international FBOs involved in development and humanitarian work, had been actively ‘knocking at the door’ to have their say. The FBOs who had been involved in the consultation tended to be those who were already ‘at the table’, through UN and other networks. They also noted that the faith actors who were involved in the consultation process were mainly Christian and that there were very few non-Christian FBOs represented.

3b. Programmatic Engagement with the SDGs

Main questions: To what extent and in what ways are you now beginning to interpret and implement the SDGs in your work? Have they changed what you do?

Main findings:

- Participants indicated, almost universally, that the SDGs have not changed how they carry out their work. Instead, they broadly reflected long-standing foci and practices in the development sector.
- For many FBOs, the SDGs are of increasing importance in their reporting and publication activities which, in part, relates to donor funding and the global programming of development work and might also affect publicity at the local level depending on the level of public awareness about the SDGs.
- Therefore, the value of the SDG framework is seen in its utility as an advocacy and communication device, rather than a programmatic framework for FBO work.

Country-specific findings:

- In Ethiopia, the estimation of the usefulness of the SDG framework was the lowest out of the three countries. Participants claimed to be guided mostly by the national development plan as well as their own organisations’ local or international priorities and programmes. None of the participants found it difficult to articulate their work in SDG language and many recognised the growing importance of the SDG framework while expressing an interest in learning more about them. Its political utility overall, however, was seen as fairly low, especially given the fairly large state control over the development sector as a whole.
- In India, some participants felt that while the name had changed from MDG to SDG, this hardly influenced the work that they were doing, although now the SDGs (and the fulfilment of them) formed part of their communication strategy. However, there were some distinct benefits mentioned, which included: the pressure on the government to provide disaggregated data to monitor the SDGs, if successful, would benefit marginalised communities in the long run; given the government’s commitment to the

SDGs, CSOs could more successfully use them as an advocacy and civil society building tool; and the SDGs enabled them to link local needs to a global framework that could help leverage funding.

- In Birmingham, we saw a broad variance in the appraisal of the SDGs to FBO work. Some felt that very little had changed from the MDG framework for the areas that concerned them, while others noted substantial differences, especially in the inclusion of new areas and broader definition of goals, which were beginning to change their work and advocacy.

3c. Areas of Convergence between FBO Work and the SDG Framework

Main questions: Which three areas, as demarcated by the SDGs, do you engage with most in your work? Which three do you engage with the least? Where do you see the most potential for conflict between the SDG and religious values? (This was run as a mapping exercise with subsequent discussion.)

Main findings:

- In all of our workshops, the main focus of the assembled organisations was on basic needs (SDG 1: No poverty, 3: Good Health and Well-Being, 4: Quality Education; though not 2: Zero Hunger) as well as on established areas of advocacy (SDG 5: Gender Equality, 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).
- Ecological themes ranked lowest throughout (14: Life Below Water, 15: Life on Land), as well as more narrowly defined economic goals (SDG 7: affordable and clean energy, 9: industry, innovation and infrastructure).
- Gender equality (SDG 5) was ranked most consistently as an SDG with conflict potential for religions. Participants stressed that they did not have personal conflicts with the goal and targets of SDG 5, but that their work made them very aware of the mismatch between the values as articulated in SDG 5 and traditional and religious parameters driving gender perceptions and practice.

Country-specific findings:

- In Ethiopia, participants stressed that their predominant focus on poverty, health, education, and gender equality reflected the most pressing needs of the population. At the same time, the structural parameters behind inequality were counted among the most problematic for religious actors to engage with (SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, and 10: Reduced Inequalities). This puts FBOs in a subsidiary position and points to the level of state ownership of the economy as well as to the reduced civil society space for critical engagement with the country's economic philosophy.
- In India, education, poverty, gender equality and 'peace justice and strong institutions' (SDG 16) emerged as the most pressing areas, with SDG 5 (gender) and SDG 16 being cited as the most challenging for religions. SDG 5 can present challenges to religious communities due to what some participants called 'traditional' understanding of gender roles and inequality. SDG 16 was seen as difficult on account of religious particularisms

in India and the potential for inter-religious tensions (exacerbated under the current political climate). SDG 10 (‘reduced inequalities’) was also noted as important, going against the perseverance of caste-based inequality. However, the SDGs make no reference to Caste and Discrimination based on Work and Descent (DWD).⁵⁸

- In the UK, much of the discussion centred around the difficulty of prioritising work around the SDGs and in general, it was felt that the framework was more helpful for advocacy rather than organisational policy. While Gender Equality (SDG 5) emerged as the most controversial goal for religious actors to engage with, participants affirmed that they did not oppose this goal personally, but that cultural and religious sensitivities needed to be taken into account more in this area, both in terms of gender construction as well as gender relations.

3d. Potential Value of the SDGs to the work of FBOs

Main questions: What is the potential value of the SDGs for your work and the sector more widely? Are their targets and indicators framed adequately for FBO and CSO engagement? What do you see as potential barriers and enablers for FBO engagement with the SDGs?

Main findings:

- Participants generally felt that the language and process facilitated by the global framework of the SDGs may be helpful to local development actors in fostering international partnerships or holding governments to account. At the same time, there was widespread scepticism as to the novelty of the SDGs and their potential to bring meaningful change to global systems of inequality.
- There was universal agreement that the goals and ethics of the SDGs were easy to adopt by FBOs and concord with religious values. While the SDGs do not use explicitly religious language and values, this was seen as adequate for a global framework.
- Where differences arose between religious values and SDG targets or indicators, participants could not agree whether these differences were cultural or religious in origin. In the UK, these differences were seen as originating in doctrine, whereas participants in Ethiopia and India were more likely to point to culture as the driving force behind these differences.
- Participants often stressed that the professionalism and procedures of FBOs were no different to any other NGO in the development sector and that therefore there was no expectation for any kind of special treatment or adaptive measures in the SDG framework.

Country-specific findings:

- In Ethiopia, participants noted the absence of personal ethics and morality in the vision of the SDGs. While this would be difficult to specify in a cross-cultural and cross-religious framework, this led to a focus on service provision and systemic issues that

missed an essential aspect to sustainable development that was especially important to a religious vision of human development.

- In India, participants saw the SDGs as an important tool for religious minorities to engage with state policy, especially as the monitoring requirements forced the state to collect disaggregated data according to factors such as caste, religion and gender. In some cases, the framework was also proving to be an effective civil society building tool, enabling groups of different faiths to coalesce around issues and present a coherent set of demands to the government.
- In the UK, systemic aspects were in the foreground of our discussions. While participants recognised the multiple advantages of the SDG framework to the conversation around global development, their ambitious scope, technocratic nature and target orientation seemed to circumvent discussions around the driving factors behind global inequality. The reformulation of development as a challenge for the global North and South alike was also seen as a potentially controversial distraction from the scale of global inequality.

4. Main Findings

- 1. All workshops on Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals attracted a broad range of participants and represented organisations with a stake in this debate.** The line between faith-based and secular actors was not always clear nor relevant and religious affiliation was very differently signified in the political and social contexts of all three countries. In India, it was notable that religion was seen as a marker of identity that had an impact upon social, economic and political inclusion, rather than the emphasis being upon the religious concepts of morality, belief and practice. In Ethiopia, understandings of religion also extended beyond religiosity per se and instead, religion was significantly aligned with regional identity, ethnicity and questions of political access.
- 2. We did not find any evidence of a systematic or significant inclusion of faith actors in the SDG consultation and implementation processes.** The participation of religious actors in the consultation process was largely confined to international settings and the engagement with the SDG framework varied widely among local faith-based organisations, even within international ones.
- 3. Faith actors did not take issue with the SDG framework as such, nor the formulation of its goals. They did note, however, that religions did add value with regards to to the successful implementation of the SDGs.** None of the goals were seen as problematic for faith groups and potential issues or conflicts in the achievement of certain goals (especially SDGs 5 and 16) were attributed to cultural and political factors, rather than religious values. Participants regularly noted the need for a greater incorporation of religious values, morals and ethical codes for their successful implementation, but did not expect these to be part of such an international framework.
- 4. Faith actors tended to appraise the SDG framework by its utility for their development practice and advocacy rather than for programmatic guidance.** Participants regularly affirmed that priorities and agendas were dictated by local needs, institutional priorities, and government plans, rather than global frameworks. Application of the SDG framework was typically limited to areas of advocacy, fund-raising, and reporting in international organisations or in local organisations with international donor funding.
- 5. Faith-based organisations expect to be treated like any other non-governmental development organisation and did not argue for a distinct religious approach to development practice.** Despite being clear about their distinct religious motivations and values, faith-based actors aspired to be recognised for their professionalism in development practice and claimed to serve multiple constituencies without any interest in proselytising through development.
- 6. The effectiveness of the SDG process for harnessing the contribution of faith actors is largely driven by local politics and administrative procedures.** Due to the national

planning and reporting structures, the implementation of the SDGs has remained a top-down process, despite the extensive consultations in setting the goals. Like all civil-society organisations, faith actors are accountable to national and local governments and often find themselves in demand structures or political confines that do not mirror the inclusive remit of the SDGs.

- 7. There is evidence that the SDGs can be useful for faith actors as a resource for advocacy.** Some faith actors recognised that the international commitments by their governments to the SDG framework gave them opportunities for advocacy, especially with regard to the inclusion of marginalised communities, better distribution of resources, and better monitoring.

5. Policy Recommendations

1. *Faith-actors should not be brought in solely as ‘religious voices’ but as development partners like all others.*

Often, local faith actors and FBOs do not want to be relegated to the ‘religion corner’. Neither is their goal in engaging with the SDGs simply to assert religious interests or perspectives. Instead, they see themselves as part of the global development effort, operate through its language, and seek to gain further visibility as development actors. For politically marginalised religious communities, this is even more crucial as the SDG process provides them with a way to increase their participation and speak back to government policy, not in order to further religious or doctrinal goals, but to ascertain the rights of their respective populations. Moreover, the areas that faith-actors choose to work on is shaped by the constituency of their beneficiaries and their organisational goals, rather than being simply driven by doctrine. Doctrinal justification may be brought in later on to give authority to paths of action selected due to the needs of the community being served.

2. *Members of NGOs and governments should increase their religious literacy, not only in terms of the history, teachings and practices of different world religions, but also with respect to how religion actually manifests in diverse settings.*

Rather than viewing religion in the Global South in terms of the ‘world religions paradigm’ alone, it is important to also consider the following three factors: First, the Western ‘world religions paradigm’ tends to prioritise texts over lived religion and the role of religious leaders as official representatives of the populations they claim to represent. Such an approach in the Global South can lead to a poor understanding of religious dynamics. Second, the ‘world religions paradigm’ tends to present religionists as belonging to only one, discrete religious tradition, when, in many places, the boundaries between religions are often not clear-cut, and people may practise or belong to more than one at the same time. Third, the ‘world religions paradigm’ also not only assumes a clear distinction between religions, but also between the secular and the religious. In many settings in the Global South, this is not a binary that reflects how people think about their religion and instead, it permeates all aspects of their private, public and political lives.

3. *Identifying which faith actors to engage with according to their relative background and expertise, and on what issues, should be given careful consideration.*

While it is important to take the contribution of faith actors to development seriously, and to realise that religion is a resource rather than an obstacle to development, religion or faith is not a panacea to solve development problems and can sometimes exacerbate inequality and conflict. There is a need to resist discourses that overstate the apparent advantages of FBOs. However, the SDGs can only be achieved if the widest range of partnerships and collaborations are encouraged and facilitated across all sectors and all levels of society. Faith actors are key to this since so many people who have the most to benefit from the SDGs live in the Global South

where levels of religiosity are high. In meeting the aim to ‘leave no one behind’, faith actors can play an important role in changing attitudes, in supporting those in need and in transforming their lives.

4. *Perceived tensions between certain SDG goals or targets and religious values should be approached by recognising that faith actors can be important mediators for gaining a more specific understanding of such tensions and finding ways of addressing them.*

Since in reality, religious doctrine is not fixed and interpretations can vary, many faith-based development actors view themselves as translators of global secular frameworks (such as the SDGs) into local religio-cultural languages. FBO representatives and other faith actors typically have a very good understanding of the breadth of doctrinal positions within their religion, and the varieties of cultural obstacles or concerns to goals such as the SDGs. As such, they should not be seen as representatives of a particular doctrinal position or ‘difficulty’, but as experts in navigating a plural field of positions and cultural practices in the interest of implementing a particular SDG goal or target in a contextually sensitive and sustainable way. This, however, may take time to be successful and needs careful identification of which subjects to tackle first and which actors to engage.

5. *In building partnerships with faith actors, it is important that they are listened to and included on their terms rather than being instrumentalised to achieve pre-defined development goals.*

Some faith actors feel that their resources and capacity have been instrumentalised to serve a secular development agenda, without including the level of transformation and fundamental structural reform that their teachings and values, as well as experience, indicate are really necessary in order to reduce human suffering and inequality. Faith actors are not alone in making this kind of critique and there are a broad range of civil society actors who are suspicious that the SDGs are going to be incapable of achieving their ends as they do not adequately tackle the root of the problems faced by the poor. The faith actors we have engaged with were not overly concerned about the secular articulation and framing of the SDG goals but they were acutely aware of the important role that a faith perspective could play in the implementation and success of the goals.

6. *More investment is needed to spread knowledge about the SDG agenda to local faith actors to enable them to participate in the international conversation and mobilise local resources for the sustainable development agenda.*

Given the lack of knowledge about the SDGs among local faith actors and the constraints arising from their top-down implementation process, there is a real risk that the SDG framework will not have the desired mobilising effect on civil society. With their close community links, religious leaders and faith-based organisations are key to changing this and more must be done to enable them to conduct advocacy for the SDGs and their inclusive paradigm of ‘leave no one behind’. Large development organisations should host regular multipliers workshops and aim for a strategic inclusion of faith actors as consultants in project planning. Likewise, national

governments should be encouraged to consult with faith actors in their implementation of the SDGs.

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