

CONCEPT

**INTRODUCTION TO THE
ROUNDTABLE ON SDG-VALUES
AND RELIGION**

2018-1

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) have become the common language to address the most important challenges for humanity and the earth. Given the fact that almost 85 % of the world population is religiously affiliated¹ and that religion is an important cultural marker in many societies, there is an urgent reason to reflect on the positive and negative roles that religion plays in efforts to meet and

develop the SDG's. The Amsterdam Centre for Religion and Sustainable Development (located at the Vrije Universiteit; Faculty of Religion and Theology) therefore initiates a series of Roundtables on religion and sustainable development. The first Roundtable aims to explore the value patterns pertinent to the interaction between the SDG-agenda and religions.

2. DESCRIPTION

- *SDG's*. In 2015 the world adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals like no poverty, zero hunger, clean water and sanitation and climate actions. The SDG-framework includes a system of indicators to measure progress. The SDG's constitute an agenda for sustainable development in the period 2015-2030. The SDG's succeeded the 8 MDG's (Millennium Development Goals). The SDG's differ from the MDG's. For example, the SDG's are much broader and more holistic. The MDG's focussed on the 'poorer' countries, in particular on the theme of poverty. The SDG's contain an agenda for all countries and the threads of inequality, social inclusion and human rights run through all SDG's.

- *Religion*. The notion of religion can be understood in many different ways, ranging from a set of beliefs or practices concerning the meaning of life as expressed in world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism,

Judaism, Christianity and Islam to the sphere of local communities, and ranging from (individual) spirituality to a systematic academic reflection (religious studies and theology). Ninian Smart helpfully suggests that religion can be described along seven dimensions, each of which can interfere in specific and often ambiguous ways with the challenges addressed in the SDG-agenda: ritual, narrative (myth), experiential, social/institutional, ethical/legal, doctrinal/philosophical, material. The narrative/mythical dimension may, for example, posit humans as stewards of creation, giving them the responsibility to protect nature and/or the freedom to instrumentalize it. The institutional dimension can be played out by religious leaders to foster hate and polarisation, or instead to support interreligious relations and peacebuilding. The values of religions are therefore not to be seen as uniform or monolithic, but as multi-layered, ambiguous, and differentiated.

3. SDG AND RELIGION FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Government

In 2016 (4 November) and 2018 (7 March), the Dutch national statistics agency (CBS) published an independent report with an overview of where the Netherlands stands in terms of achieving the targets set for the SDG's.² In 2019 this overview will be integrated with the recently developed monitor on well-being.

The 2018 report states (among many other outcomes) that the Netherlands ranks high in comparison to other European countries with respect to institutional trust, economy, and accessibility of public transport, but low in terms of the share of renewable energy and the number of women in management positions.

1. Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012), *The Global Religious Landscape*. Online: <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/> Published 18.12-2012. Accessed 21.05.2018.

2. The 2016 report can be found at <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2016/44/meten-van-sdgs-een-eerste-beeld-voor-nederland>. The 2018 report can be found at <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2018/10/duurzame-ontwikkelingsdoelen-de-stand-voor-nederland>.

The report refers to discussions about the SDG-agenda. According to critics, there is no coherent theoretical framework behind the SDG's. The UN-list of indicators does not include all the relevant aspects of intergenerational sustainability. More importantly, there are only a few footprint-indicators that show how production and consumption in one country affect the rest of the world and the environment. The 2018 report of CBS includes no mention whatsoever of religion. The 2017 report refers to the contribution of churches to combat poverty (SDG 1).

Religious traditions and communities

Mainstream religious traditions are more and more committed to sustainable development as there is both a connection to essential values within their traditions as well as to pertinent contemporary challenges. Church leaders like Pope Francis and the 'green' Patriarch Bartholomew have become prominent voices. At the same time, one can refer to many initiatives taken by other religions. The Governing Council Meeting of the International Buddhist Confederation, for example, discussed in 2016 how Buddhism may contribute to achieving SGD's. There is furthermore a growing awareness that indigenous traditions and non-western religions espouse a different kind of relationship between humans and nature, which may bolster a critical response to the anthropocentric traditions of the West (both religious and non-religious).

Faith-Based Organisations

A specific role in the SDG-religion-nexus is played by 'faith-based organizations' (FBO's). It is hard to give one clear definition of an FBO, but several types can be distinguished: 'faith-permeated', connection with religious faith is evident at all levels, 'faith-centered', strongly connected with the religious community through funding sources and affiliation, 'faith-affiliated', retains some influence of their religious founders, but looks beyond the faith community for staffing and support, 'faith-background', tends to look and act secular though they may have a historical link to a faith tradition, and 'faith-secular partnership', a secular entity joins with explicitly religious organizations.³

Academy

Until recently, the overall interaction between religion

and SDG's did not receive much scholarly attention. However, several projects investigate the relationship between religion and SDG's. There is for example the project of Emma Tomalin of the Centre for Religion and Public Life (University of Leeds). In 2017 she received a grant to develop an agenda on 'Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals'.⁴ Other examples include the Joint Learning Initiative with leading scholars like Alistair Ager and Katherine Marshall⁵ and research done by the Centre for Religion, Conflict and Globalization (University of Groningen). At the same time, research has been done on the interaction between religion and issues related to particular SDG's. One can refer here for example to the issue of gender (SDG 5). Religion and Climate Change is similarly attracting significant attention, for example in the Vrije Universiteit's Distinguished Fellowship in the Ethics of the Anthropocene.⁶

Business

1. Within the Netherlands the 'Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers' (known as VNO-NCW) is involved in several initiatives related to Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*.
2. Within the Islamic world, one can find Islamic micro-finance as an important component in poverty alleviation strategies (SDG 1).
3. There is cooperation between the World Bank and faith-based and religious organizations. In January 2014, the World Bank Group revitalized its engagement with faith-based and religious organizations based on a recognition that they are doing essential work on the frontlines of combatting extreme poverty, protecting the vulnerable, delivering essential services and alleviating suffering.⁷



3. See for example Unruh, H. R. & R.J. Sider (2005), A typology of faith-based organizations and programs. In H. R. Unruh & R. J. Sider, *Saving souls, serving society: Understanding the faith factor in church-based social ministry*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. Chapter 6.

4. See https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/news/article/4821/keeping_faith_in_2030_religions_and_the_sustainable_development_goals.

5. <https://jiflfc.com/>

6. See also Sachdeva, S. (2016), Religious Identity, Beliefs, and Views about Climate Change. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science*. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.013.335.

7. See <http://www.worldbank.org/en/about/partners/brief/faith-based-organizations>.

4. COOPERATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND RELIGION

There is some interaction between the Dutch government and FBO's on SDG's. In two governmental reports on the development of SDG's in the Netherlands (2017 and 2018), the consulted parties included government departments, business and civil society, and FBO's like Cordaid, ICCO, and Prisma.⁸

Internationally, the United Nations (UN) recognizes the contributions of FBO's to the SDG's. As the authors of the report 'Realizing the Faith Dividend: Religion, Gender, Peace and Security in Agenda 2030' put it: "From the perspective of the United Nations, given its mandate covering sustainable development, peace and security, and human rights, has [sic] a clear understanding of the role of faith-based entities" (Karam, 2016: 5).⁹ This clear understanding resulted in the establishment of the 'United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging with Faith-Based Organizations for Sustainable Development' (UN IATF-FBO), which has a particular concern for the SDG-agenda and has led to the formation of a 'Network of Peers on Religion and Development'.

However, there seem to be some second thoughts amongst UN agencies concerning the inclusion of religious institutions as significant factors with respect to engaging the SDG-agenda. As the aforementioned report 'Realizing the Faith Dividend' puts it: "(...) several UN agencies referenced an ongoing challenge by complications inherent in engaging with FBO's, including a dominant organizational culture which still tends to adopt a narrative of religion as being a force of evil and backwardness" (Karam, 2016: 14).

The above-mentioned report claims that there is a trust issue amongst those engaging in the SDG-agenda: secular actors distrusting FBO's and vice versa. The 'Realizing the Faith Dividend-report' sums up five recommendations for future directions:

1. Continue 'Safe' Convening and Catalytic Synergies: Creating a more regular and systematic way of having meetings between the UN and FBO's

- regarding the SDG-agenda;
2. Develop Multi-religious Narratives on the SDG's – A Resource Tool for all Development Practitioners: because SDG's are embedded in a rather secular framework, developing multi-religious narratives might overcome this shortcoming;
3. Develop Faith-Inspired Indicators and Measurement for SDG's: FBO's should work together with government agencies to formulate broader indicators for SDG's;
4. Outreach to Engage the grassroots through intra- and inter-religious initiatives. Convene Intra- and Inter-faith around contributions to SDG's: there should be more engagement with FBO's that do the work on 'the ground';
5. Identify and Support Inter-faith Technical cooperation opportunities.

Several examples of establishing further cooperation and building trust between religion and secular development actors can be mentioned:

1. In 2016 'The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development' (PaRD) was established. It brings together members and partners from all over the world to harness the positive impact of religion and religious values in sustainable development and humanitarian assistance. Membership of PaRD is voluntary and open to all governmental and intergovernmental entities. Partners are civil society and non-governmental organizations such as religious and value-driven organizations, secular NGO's, community initiatives, foundations, academic institutions and other relevant development organizations. Among its present members are the governments of Germany, Britain, and Norway as well as multilateral organizations such as the World Bank and the African Union.¹⁰
2. Over the last thirty years, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (the 'green' patriarch) took diverse initiatives that represent his conviction that societal challenges need to be resolved in dialogue and partnership. These initiatives include international,

8. The 2017-report can be found at <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2017/05/24/nederlandse-rapportage-over-de-duurzame-ontwikkelingsdoelen>. The 2018-report can be found at <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2018/05/01/tweede-nederlandse-sdg-rapportage-nederland-ontwikkelt-duurzaam>.

9. For the report, see <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/realizing-faith-dividend>.

10. <http://www.partner-religion-development.org/>

inter-religious and interdisciplinary symposia. In 1997 a symposium about the Black Sea was held under the joint auspices of the Patriarch and the President of the European Commission. In 2006 a symposium about the Amazon was held under the patronage of the Patriarch and Kofi Annan, secretary-general of the United Nations. In 2007 a symposium about the Arctic Sea was held under the joint auspices of Jose Barroso (President of the European Commission) and Kofi Annan. In 2012, Halki Summit I was held with the theme of 'a conversation on environment, ethics and innovation'. In 2015 there was Halki Summit II, titled 'a conversation on the environment, literature and the arts'. In June 2018 a symposium is held in Athens.

3. Another practice of cooperation is found in the mining

industry in South Africa. It is an inter-faith initiative called 'courageous conversations'. This initiative is organized, among others, by Thabo Makgoba, Archbishop of Cape Town and Metropolitan of the Anglican Church of South Africa. The courageous conversations aim to provide a safe space in which managers, unions, NGO's, the government and religious leaders can bring their unique concerns and contributions to the conversation honestly. The conversations provide an alternative to polarization. The conversations are derived from the concept of 'indaba', a word in IsiZulu, one of South Africa's languages, describing purposeful gatherings for the common good. Makgoba proposes to develop indaba in several sectors of the economy.¹¹

5. SDG-VALUES AND INDICATORS

The question of the values operant in the SDG-framework and the measurement of the indicators becomes pertinent. The Millennium Declaration had an explicit set of underlying values (freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, shared responsibility), that can be recognized in the SDG-framework as well. Robert, Parris & Leiserowitz however, argue that such values are often ambiguous and overlap or coincide with goals and indicators, thereby obscuring the fundamental discussion about these values.¹² The 2000 earth charter was more explicit about its value sources in "contemporary science, international law, the teachings of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of the world's great religions and philosophical traditions, ..., the global ethics movement, ..., and best practices for building sustainable communities".

Many FBO's are concerned with the secular nature of the SDG-agenda, specifically the indicators and

measurements. What the FBO's – most notably Salvation Army, Global Scripture Impact, and Compassion International – intend to contribute to the secular agenda is a more spiritual layer to the indicators and measurements of SDG's. A helpful example is the 'Faith-based Action Framework to End Extreme Poverty and Realize the SDG's', which was launched in April 2015 and endorsed by more than 40 FBO's. This action framework gravitates around three key commitments: (1) to generate and be guided by evidence; (2) to advocate by holding governments and other actors accountable to their SDG's promises; (3) to nurture more collaboration amongst religious and other actors regarding the SDG-agenda.¹³ The debate about the SDG-values and the inclusion/exclusion of religion has in fact just started and these Roundtables (as organized by Amsterdam Centre for Religion and Sustainable Development) intend to play a key role in that debate.

11. Makgoba, T. (2017), Acting incarnationally: Reflections of an archbishop. *The Presbyterian Outlook: Leading Faithful Conversation in the Church and Beyond*, 199(4), 101-105.

12. Robert, K.W., T.M. Parris & A.A. Leiserowitz (2005), What is Sustainable Development? Goals, Indicators, Values, and Practice. *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 47(3): 8-21.

13. Link to the action framework: <https://jiflc.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Faith-Based-Action-Framework.pdf>.