

# Dignity of the Human Person Is Central to UN Sustainable Goals

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By JEAN F. DUFF, MA, MPH, and HELENA MANGUERRA

**R**eligious belief has long inspired service to others, particularly to the most poor and vulnerable. Some may say that religious groups are the original charity service providers, but now, in our increasingly globalized world, religious groups are far from alone in their focus on the global alleviation of poverty.

The United Nations has spearheaded much of this kind of work, particularly through setting the “Global Goals” that member states and international organizations agree to pursue. These goals present a significant and concrete opportunity for religious and faith-based groups to scale up their impact on poverty through joint action towards shared aspirations in human development.

## DO GLOBAL GOALS WORK?

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development — commonly known as the Sustainable Development Goals — are worldwide aspirations adopted in September 2015 at the U.N. General Assembly. Among the 17 goals are ending poverty, ensuring healthy lives and taking urgent action to combat climate change.

Though more than 150 world leaders officially endorsed the goals, there is no legally binding enforcement mechanism. Skeptics may wonder what results can reasonably be expected. However, the preceding set of U.N. Global Goals — the eight “Millennium Development Goals” which were adopted in 2000 and concluded in 2015 — provided a successful framework for collaborative work towards ending extreme poverty. The Millennium Development Goals made some major progress: between 2000 and 2015, extreme poverty (at that time, defined as the percentage of the global population living on less than \$1.25 per day) fell from 47 percent to 14 percent. The global

number of deaths of children under 5 years old dropped from 90 deaths to 43 deaths per 1,000 live births between 1990 and 2015. During that same time frame, the maternal mortality ratio declined by 45 percent worldwide, with the majority of the reduction occurring after 2000.<sup>1</sup>

The progress made through the Millennium Development Goals suggests that the establishment and guidance of worldwide goals were instrumental to the achievements in human development. The goals set mostly clear targets and indicators, thus improving policy monitoring and accountability. Their adoption by world leaders spotlighted aspirations for different dimensions of human development, ranging from economic security to access to education to gender equality. Global advocacy converged, and global and national resources and new partnerships were mobilized towards poverty reduction and human development. Heads of state and politicians faced peer pressure to achieve the goals, and official development assistance increased from \$80 bil-

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lion in 2000 to \$147 billion (constant 2014 U.S. dollars) in 2015.<sup>2</sup>

The Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 created a new framework for global aspirations and improved upon the Millennium Development Goals, which were criticized for excluding or inadequately incorporating several important issues such as environmental sustainability, inequality and productive employment, and for focusing too much on goals for lower-income countries.

Furthermore, in contrast to the Millennium Development Goals that allegedly were drafted in a U.N. basement by a small group of men,<sup>3</sup> the Sustainable Development Goals were formed during two years of unprecedented, extensive global online and in-person consultations. Several million people submitted input on what kind of a world they imagined for their children, and the multilayered global consultation led to goals applicable to people of all countries. Although the Sustainable Development Goals are now more inclusive than the Millennium Development Goals, they also have expanded from eight Millennium Development Goals to 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 indicators to measure progress — a scale some have criticized for being unwieldy or difficult to grasp.

The 17th and final Sustainable Development Goal describes a cross-cutting aspiration: to “strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.” U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon’s synthesis report on the Post-2015 Agenda says, “Inclusive partnerships must be a key feature of implementation at all levels: global, regional, national and local .... The Sustainable Development Goals provide a platform for aligning private action and public policies. Transformative partnerships are built upon principles and values, a shared vision and shared goals: placing people and the planet at the center. They include the participation of all relevant stakeholders.”<sup>4</sup>

Achieving and implementing the Global Goals will require full, and likely new, engagement and partnership of all individuals, organizations and governments, including — and given their unique capabilities and assets, perhaps especially — religious and faith-based groups.

## SHARED VALUES

At the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals, Pope Francis became the fifth Pope to address the U.N. General Assembly. Francis endorsed the goals, calling the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development “an important sign of hope.”

The goals’ preamble shows remarkable synergy with the guiding principles of Catholic social thinking: “As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavor to reach the furthest behind first.”<sup>5</sup>

As in Catholic social teaching, affirmation of the “dignity of the human person” is at the center of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Catholic notion of the preferential option for the poor is aligned with the goals’ endeavor “to reach the furthest behind first.” Instead of legal coercion, moral conviction and values are the driving forces behind the joint action that the goals propose.

Religious and faith-based groups’ shared values, long-standing experience and reach are starting points for linking with other partners seeking to implement the Global Goals. It also is important to recognize that religious groups’ impact can

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Secretary General’s synthesis report

be scaled up through these partnerships, as well as vice versa. Partnership among public sector, private secular organizations and religious groups can increase the overall impact beyond that of any organization acting alone.

## VALUABLE PARTNERS

Governments and multilateral organizations are showing increasing interest in the unique assets and capabilities of religious groups, particularly



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the role of local faith networks and communities in sustaining impact. With 5,500 hospitals, 18,000 dispensaries, 9,000 orphanages, and 16,000 homes for the elderly, the Catholic Church is the largest nongovernmental health provider in the world. These facilities, which some estimate represent 26 percent of facilities worldwide, are linked to a vast congregational infrastructure.<sup>6</sup>

Religious leaders possess tremendous social capital, powerful for spreading positive messages and changing community behaviors. For example, one of the key turning points in halting the Ebola epidemic in West Africa was realizing the role of unsafe community burial practices in spreading the disease. Faith leaders played a critical role in changing these practices.<sup>7</sup> (See story page 47.)

Time and time again, evidence shows that faith leaders are influential and effective in educating the public about healthier behaviors. In India, for example, faith leaders spread messages to millions of people about the lifesaving benefits of proper hand washing, sanitation and hygiene.

International, national and local faith-based organizations and representatives of congregational networks working alone and often together, actively contribute in myriad ways to realizing the Sustainable Development Goals, with strong representation from Catholic organizations and religious networks. Many large, international faith-based organizations such as World Vision International, Catholic Relief Services, Episcopal Relief and Development and Islamic Relief are trusted partners and implementers of public sector health and development programs. For example, Catholic Relief Services has partnered with the U.S. Agency for International Development, the World Evangelical Alliance, Islamic Relief and others to help set up an interreligious platform of peace in the Central African Republic.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, CAFOD, the official Catholic aid agency for England and Wales, helps partners in Sierra Leone and Liberia spread educational messages about good hygiene and safe burial practices by training priests, parish volunteers, imams, spiritualists and traditional healers to deliver these messages. Caritas Internationalis, along with UNAIDS, the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (known as PEPFAR) and Bambino Gesù children's hospital in Rome have developed a road map for the future for children living with HIV, and they have committed to

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use “the unique voice of faith communities and related organizations to save the lives of children living with HIV and their parents, and to accompany the empowerment of affected families.”<sup>9</sup> The international Catholic Medical Mission Board partners with local faith-based organizations to deliver sustainable, quality health care solutions to women, children and their communities.

The broader development community also is demonstrating interest in more systematic and direct partnerships with religious bodies. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, an international financing organization based in Switzerland, has partnered with the United Methodist Church in the “Imagine No Malaria” campaign. The United Methodist Church mobilized its church networks to donate more than \$20 million to the campaign since 2010.

Mark Dybul, MD, executive director of the Global Fund, said, “This is the largest contribution ever received [by the Global Fund] from a faith-based organization, and it's extremely encouraging to see partners of all sectors coming together to eliminate malaria.” According to the annual report issued by the Global Fund to the United Methodist Church, the latter was one of the most significant nongovernment donors.<sup>10</sup>

### **LOCALIZATION**

Localization of aid is a significant trend within development policy. The so-called localization agenda calls for working horizontally with local actors, placing them at the center of decision-making and implementing services that affect their local community, as they are often first responders and provide more sustainable, targeted and effective aid. Religious groups and faith-based organizations increasingly advocate for local faith communities to be integrated into the broader localization agenda, highlighting the evidence for

the unique roles that local faith communities and faith leaders have in community development and humanitarian response. The mobilization of the Catholic Church and other religious networks in West Africa in response to the Ebola epidemic is a great example.

### CONCRETE ACTIONS

Faith-based organizations, religious institutions and congregational networks can scale up their important and unique contributions towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Here are four concrete actions that can increase impact:

**1. Strengthen and communicate the evidence for religious and faith-based groups' contributions to Global Goals.** Development institutions such as the World Bank, as well as national governments, can fund evidence-based, scalable solutions that deliver development outcomes. As the bedrock for partnerships between the religious community and public and private funders, religious and faith-based organizations must continually improve information on the contribution of their work. The U.K. medical journal *The Lancet's* 2015 series on faith-based health care delivery is an excellent example of evidence for policymakers considering engaging with faith-based providers.<sup>11</sup> Many international Catholic organizations participate with the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities,<sup>12</sup> an international collaboration, to strengthen the evidence base and better communicate it to policymakers.

**2. Build capacity of local faith communities to expand their influence on health and community well-being.** The “localization agenda” and interest in partnering with local communities are gaining momentum in the broader development community. A huge scale-up in capacity building for local faith communities is necessary so that they can be fully integrated into the broader localization agenda. Cardinal John Onaiyekan, the archbishop of Abuja, Nigeria, together with the Sultan of the Sokoto caliphate in Nigeria, established the Nigerian Interfaith Action Association that has mobilized and equipped more than 200,000 pastors and imams in the West African country.<sup>13</sup> Results show that where the influence of

faith leaders was added to the local public health campaign, almost 100 percent more children under the age of 5 were sleeping under mosquito nets, than for the public health intervention alone.

**3. Support faith-based advocacy that holds governments and organizations accountable for funding and delivering quality development outcomes.** Faith leaders are well placed to serve as the “moral voice” pressuring government, organizations and donors to be accountable to their constituents and advocating for the needs of local communities. Equipped with key messages and talking points, faith leaders often are the most influential advocates to public and elected officials. The Faith for International Assistance group<sup>14</sup> supports evidence-based advocacy by faith leaders, including many Catholics, towards members of Congress on sustaining U.S. public funding for poverty-focused development assistance.

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**4. Ensure faith-based service providers are aligned with the standards set forth in the Sustainable Development Goals.** A 2015 survey of health care facilities found that in 54 low- and middle-income countries, 38 percent of health care facilities lacked access to basic levels of water, 19 percent lacked sanitation and 35 percent lacked water and soap for hand-washing.<sup>15</sup> Based on that data, the World Health Organization and UNICEF developed a global action plan for water, sanitation and hygiene in health care facilities. Catholic health care facilities and other faith-based service providers should actively strive to meet these basic standards.<sup>16</sup>

Religious and faith-based organizations are central players in improving the lives of communities worldwide and meeting Global Goals. The likelihood of the achievement of the ambitious Global Goals is a great deal more likely if partnerships can be forged between religious and faith groups, and across sectors between faith, public and private sectors. Together, faith-based and

civil society organizations can use their influence and their social networks to provide for the common good on a large scale. These partnerships help to ensure that everyone can benefit from the progress of global development.

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