Tailoring Peer-to-Peer Learning on “Faith for Rights”

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Abstract

Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental freedom that provokes tensions but equally provides opportunities for synergy and mutual enhancement with other human rights. This article explores lessons learned from implementing the “Faith for Rights” framework which has been developed by faith-based actors and UN independent experts through a global consultative process since 2017. Related peer-to-peer learning workshops have been tailored to different audiences, including children, youth, students and scholars, parliamentarians, judges and prosecutors, civil servants, diplomats, UN independent experts, national human rights institutions, faith-based actors, human rights defenders and peer-learning facilitators. In conclusion, the article calls for an inclusive human rights “diplocacy” by strategically combining diplomacy and advocacy tools for managing religious diversity in a human rights-based manner that resolve tensions between numerous rights in the context of religions and beliefs.
Keywords


1 Introduction

Political and religious leaders should speak out firmly and promptly against intolerance, discriminatory stereotyping and instances of hate speech. Teaching materials and peer-to-peer learning should promote respect for pluralism and diversity in the field of religion or belief. Exchanges of lessons learned and promising practices should continue to be promoted, including with the support of the United Nations.1

The above quote from a 2023 report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights highlights the importance of peer-to-peer learning in order to combat intolerance, discrimination and incitement to violence against persons based on religion or belief. Negative stereotyping and stigmatization of certain believers are vicious because the person who exercises such bias often does so unconsciously. A related challenge is discrimination and violence committed in the name of religion. In this context, freedom of religion or belief is a double-edged sword but may also serve as a shield from pushbacks against human rights in the name of fanatic interpretation of religions or their political instrumentalization.

Countering such powerfully destructive trends requires critical thinking and diversity within the religious sphere. Ensuring respect for religious pluralism is not only a moral imperative but also a legal obligation if the freedom of religion or belief were to be accepted by all, for all, without discrimination. A human rights-based approach to faith requires that believers are equally respected and can freely practice their religion or belief. Early education is key for anchoring diversity at the heart of human reflexes since childhood. Faith values are particularly powerful in terms of deepening humbleness and rooting respect and fraternity among human beings. Such a major contribution by faith values to planting equal dignity in the hearts of children marks them for their whole lives. Reaching such transformative depth is a precondition for social inclusiveness, peace and harmony. Educating and engaging diverse

communities as stakeholders in peer-to-peer learning and “sharing space” is an efficient way to face the practical challenges of promoting respect for pluralism and diversity in the field of religion or belief with a human rights-based approach.2

This article outlines the “Faith for Rights” framework, which has been developed by faith-based and civil society actors working in the field of human rights and UN independent experts through a global consultative process under the auspices of the United Nations (see section 2). The article then explores lessons learned from organizing peer-to-peer learning workshops online and offline since 2017, which have been tailored to different audiences (see section 3). It concludes with a call for inclusive human rights “diplocacy” by strategically combining diplomacy and advocacy for human rights, prioritizing in both cases education as a central tool of peer-to-peer learning in the context of religions and beliefs (see section 4). Mutual literacy is a precondition for shifting from superficial interreligious dialogues into productive interfaith action. Mere co-existence of communities alongside each other, in an indifferent mode of “tolerance”, does not advance human rights. However, interactive peer-to-peer learning and genuine engagement with other communities do.

2 “Faith for Rights” Framework and Toolkit

The “Faith for Rights” framework consists of two soft law instruments3 (the Beirut Declaration and its corresponding 18 Commitments, elaborated in 2017


by independent civil society actors and UN independent experts working in the human rights field, as well as an implementation methodology based on peer-to-peer learning (the #Faith4Rights toolkit, developed since 2019 by OHCHR in collaboration with civil society experts).

At the framework’s launch in March 2017, the then High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, stressed the common objective among both Faith and Rights movements to foster developing peaceful societies, which uphold human dignity and equality for all and where diversity is not just tolerated but fully respected and celebrated. His successor, Michelle Bachelet, suggested that the “Faith for Rights” framework be translated into practical outreach tools and capacity-building programmes. She underlined the crucial two-ways role played by religious leaders in either defending or undermining human rights, peace and security; she argued that '[r]espect for human rights shapes societies that are more peaceful, more resilient, more sustainably developed. Furthermore, on his first day in office, High Commissioner Volker Türk highlighted the importance of working with governments, civil society organizations, parliamentarians and faith leaders to advance the cause of human rights as ‘a common language of humanity’. This requires forging a new worldwide consensus on human rights, broadening its base of support, and promoting ‘a 21st century human rights vision that is transformative; solution-oriented; unifying; and that speaks directly to every person’s need for justice and search for meaning in life’. Volker Türk also stressed the need to ‘build networks and amplify voices that can cut through the hate’, noting the example of the “Faith

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4 All related documents are available online at https://www.ohchr.org/en/faith-for-rights.
for Rights” framework, which engages religious leaders in an effort to respond to hatred and incitement of violence.9

The #Faith4Rights toolkit is designed to enhance critical thinking through interactive peer-to-peer learning in a solution-oriented manner based on grass-roots experience. Such cultural sensitivity and social inclusion provide optimal chances for managing and celebrating the cultural and religious diversity within societies so that they blossom in a harmonious and enriching manner. Mere co-existence and tolerance are not enough for achieving social peace and progress. Faith-based and civil society actors gathering in Beirut in 2017 realized the importance of transcending co-existence to full respect, and shifting from mere dialogue to concrete joint interfaith actions. They also identified the obstacles on this path, stating in the Beirut Declaration that they have launched together ‘the most noble of all struggles, peaceful but powerful, against our own egos, self-interest and artificial divides’, with a view to transcending ‘preaching to action’ as well as promoting ‘mutual acceptance and fraternity among people of different religions or beliefs and empower[ing] them to defeat negative impulses of hatred, viciousness, manipulation, greed, cruelty and related forms of inhumanity’.10

The COVID-19 experience revealed the deficit of solidarity and collaboration to fulfil basic economic and social rights, particularly through international cooperation, which is a human rights obligation for States Parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights pursuant to its article 2.11 Shortly after the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, the international multi-faith organisation Religions for Peace issued the following statement, stressing the autonomous role and responsibilities of faith actors and advocating for this missing solidarity from an inter-religious perspective of shared values:

Our core responsibility as faith actors is to translate ethical values into concrete actions. A compelling way to do this is to promote human rights, fraternity and solidarity through the ‘Faith for Rights’ framework. Beyond religious institutions and faith leaders, such a joint approach to face the current health crisis—and its severe economic and social


implications—is also an individual responsibility. The ‘Faith for Rights’ framework and its 18 commitments reach out to individual theistic, non-theistic, atheistic or other believers in all regions of the world to enhance cohesive, peaceful and respectful societies on the basis of a common action-oriented platform. To fulfil this responsibility of believers, in this broad definition of religion or belief, we encourage faith actors to use the online #Faith4Rights toolkit.\footnote{Religions for Peace, \textit{Statement by Religions for Peace on Coronavirus Crisis} (19 March 2020), available online at https://www.rfp.org/statement-by-religions-for-peace-on-coronavirus-crisis/ and quoted in the #Faith4Rights toolkit (Geneva: United Nations, 2023), available at https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Press/faith4rights-toolkit.pdf, p. 77.}

The toolkit includes peer-to-peer learning modules for each of the 18 Commitments on “Faith for Rights” as well as more than a dozen cases to debate, for instance about hate speech by religious and political leaders in the context of a pandemic.\footnote{OHCHR, #Faith4Rights toolkit (Geneva: United Nations, 2023), p. 96.}

3 Lessons from Peer Learning Tailored to Different Audiences

It is vital for the success of each peer-to-peer learning exercise to be contextualized and tailored to the specific context and needs of a particular group of participants. This section shares lessons learned from online and offline workshops for children, youth, students and scholars, parliamentarians, judges and prosecutors, civil servants, diplomats, UN independent experts and secretariat of regional or international organizations, national human rights institutions, faith-based actors, human rights defenders and peer-learning facilitators. Obviously, the participants of peer-to-peer learning events often relate to several of these twelve profiles. However, we would like to present below various ideas for exercises and discussion clustered according to these categories, even if they can at times overlap in practice.

3.1 Children

Peer-to-peer learning is equally suited and even most strategically advisable for children. It can be tailored for various types of school learning and participatory activities. Childhood is the most fertile and foundational phase where
seeds of inclusive societies should be planted. Teachers will assume the role of facilitators, including the contextualization of the topic and related material for discussions among children. Any peer-to-peer learning with children will largely depend on their age and level of maturity as well as the consent by their parents or legal guardians. This is important because international human rights law guarantees ‘the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion’ as well as ‘the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child’. In this context, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted that ‘[t]he more the child himself or herself knows, has experienced and understands, the more the parent, legal guardian or other persons legally responsible for the child have to transform direction and guidance into reminders and advice and later to an exchange on an equal footing’. There are therefore numerous precautions when discussing about faith and rights with children, depending on their evolving capacities, either in the presence of their parents or without them. It remains an undoubtedly fascinating and eye-opening exercise when children express themselves and hear each other’s perspective on religious pluralism and cultural diversity. Not only this unleashes their potential of free thinking, but it also may make them proud of both their identities individually and appreciative of virtues of their diversity at the collective level. These are the two strategic objectives of engaging children in peer-to-peer learning on “Faith for Rights”, especially when a negative attitude towards some religions prevails in the society concerned.

A substantive entry point for discussion with older children and their parents or legal guardians could be Commitment XII, which pledges to promote

15 Ibid., Article 14(1).
16 Ibid., Article 14(2). See also Article 18(4) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as Article 13(3) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (which both contain the following text, see UN Doc. A/RES/2200 (XXI), A, annex: ‘The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians ... to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions’).
17 Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12: The Right of the Child to be Heard (2009), UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/12, para. 84.
respect for ‘the right not to receive religious instruction that is inconsistent with one’s conviction’.¹⁹ The facilitator could explain that the rights of all persons to be exempted from instruction in a particular religion are ‘valuable because they allow for diversity in education and may promote the realization of the right to education with due respect for cultural diversity and the cultural rights of learners’.²⁰ A related discussion topic could be how to distinguish such instruction in a particular religion from ‘public school instruction in subjects such as general history of religions and ethics’, since the latter is permissible—even against the wishes of parents or legal guardians—if it is given in a neutral and objective way.²¹ Yet this distinction between religious instruction and education about general history of religions and ethics may be difficult to establish clearly in practice, since it depends not only on the curriculum and textbooks but also on the teacher’s way of presenting these topics to the pupils.²² This is what makes such a topic even more interesting for a discussion with and among children. In addition, the dynamic nature of the child’s evolving capacities implies that at a certain point—depending on the individual child’s personal situation and maturity, which needs to be determined on a case-by-case basis,—his or her freedom of religion or belief will ultimately prevail over the parental rights.²³ All this may complicate the task of a facilitator of a peer-to-peer learning event, especially if children and their parents or legal guardians participate at the same time. The best interests of the child should always be a primary consideration, while maintaining neutrality and respect in relation to both the children and adults.²⁴

²¹ Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 22: Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion (1993), UN Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, para. 6.
Another topic, particularly in those countries where numbers of citizens and residents of foreign origins are on the rise, is to discuss the notions of majority and minorities of all kinds. Questions may relate to the richness this represents and which tensions may arise, reaching the ultimate goal of this whole discussion, which is appreciating the power of diversity and the entitlement by all members of minorities to equal rights.

For younger children, Commitment XII could be transposed into child-friendly language by identifying the most important elements and simplifying the human rights message, without losing the core substance of the “Faith for Rights” commitments. In this context, within their preparation for tailoring the peer learning to children’s needs, the facilitators would benefit from consulting a helpful guide for producing child-friendly texts, including the methodology of getting children involved, sample consent forms and the following tips from children to make a document child-friendly:

Do:
- Use simple, clear language
- Explain difficult words
- Give examples
- Make it colourful
- Use images that are relevant to the children and their context

Don’t:
- Make it too long
- Make it too simple—don't patronise them
- Have pages of black and white print
- Use images and pictures that are not relevant or are just for decoration

The facilitator could also talk with the children about the toolkit’s case to debate on environmental issues (Annex D): An interfaith group of religious leaders in the State of Secularita posted faith-based quotes on stickers above

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the water taps in public schools, indicating ‘Save water, it is a divine gift!’28 This scenario—hypothetical, yet close to the lived reality of many pupils—allows for a free-flowing discussion about complex issues such as the role of religion in public schools, the meaning of secularism and environmental protection. In this context, the #Faith4Rights toolkit also refers to the complaint by sixteen children, including Greta Thunberg, about States failing to prevent and mitigate the consequences of climate change, and the 2021 decision by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.29 The facilitator may also wish to discuss the outcome document on ‘Climate change and environmental protection’ as debated during the 2019 session of the OIC Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission,30 as well as the World Council of Churches’ commitments to children31 and its ‘Roadmap of Communities and Churches for an Economy of Life and Ecological Justice’.32 These concrete examples may facilitate discussing the faith-based and legal dilemmas related to intergenerational climate justice that children and future generations will have to face even more than today’s older persons. The notion of the rights of future generations will certainly be of interest to children.

3.2 Youth

Another, partially overlapping, category of participants of peer-to-peer learning events may involve youth (or “young people”), whose age is—according to different and inconsistent definitions—in a range between 10 and 32 years.33 Youth are the most dynamic and vulnerable population in terms of religious influences, and they shape the future of their societies. Peer-to-peer learning on the complex connection between beliefs and rights is therefore of strategic importance.

29 Ibid., referring to the decision adopted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure, concerning Communication No. 104/2019 (adopted on 22 September 2021), UN Doc. CRC/C/88/D/104/2019. See also the Committee’s open letter which includes a simplified explanation of the case, available online at https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Open_letter_on_climate_change.pdf.
Among numerous subjects of particular interest to the youth (and educational relevance in the context of freedom of conscience), the facilitator may for example discuss conscientious objection to military service, which is most relevant for this age group since young people are drafted into compulsory military service in many States around 18 years.\textsuperscript{34} The facilitator could ask the participants if their national laws still include obligatory military service, if only men are covered by conscription, and what they think about it. The facilitator could ask what reasons should qualify as conscientious objection to military service and who should decide on this? How should any alternative service be organized in order to accommodate the conscientious objector? In this context, the facilitator could read in advance of the session the 2022 analytical report to the UN Human Rights Council, which provides detailed guidance in line with international norms and standards.\textsuperscript{35} If participants are interested, they could also simulate the discussion between a conscientious objector to military service and members of a decision-making body that determines whether the conscientious objection is genuinely held in a specific case. This exercise should be introduced by the facilitator as a hypothetical role play, in which the participants do not necessarily indicate their personal convictions but instead invent possible questions of the decision-making body and hypothetical answers of the conscientious objector. The aim is to sensitize the participants to the range of ethical and procedural dilemmas, often involving religious beliefs, rather than forcing them to divulge their own views or internal reasoning.

A further step of the peer-to-peer learning could be to discuss if conscientious objection(s) should only be legally recognized with regard to military service or also against other comparable issues. In this regard, the facilitator could give some national or international examples such as conscientious objections against paying taxes for military appropriations\textsuperscript{36} or for supporting a different religious community; against carrying out an abortion or implanting contraceptive coils;\textsuperscript{37} against facing the flag and singing the national anthem at school ceremonies;\textsuperscript{38} or against the domestic duty for landowners to join a
hunting association and tolerate the hunt of wild animals on their property.\textsuperscript{39}

Are there compelling—legal, religious or ethical—reasons for treating these conscientious objections differently? Would it open the floodgates if any subjective reasons were covered under the absolutely protected freedom of conscience? Again, the facilitator would need to be well prepared for such a discussion, ideally raising these questions for each participant to answer individually and confidentially, rather than trying to impose a standard solution (which may not exist in the first place).

Furthermore, many young people have grown up as digital natives, however, the facilitator needs to take into account the participants’ different socio-economic backgrounds and level of Internet penetration in their societies, which may have led to a digital divide as well as gaps between women and men in their access to information and communications technologies.\textsuperscript{40}

The #Faith4Rights toolkit suggests for the 18 commitments a tweeting exercise, which aims at summarizing, either individually or in small groups, each “Faith for Rights” commitment in less than 140 characters and “social-mediатize” its key message. Such exercises have been piloted by OHCHR in youth workshops since 2018, including in Marrakesh where some participants spontaneously sent the resulting tweets\textsuperscript{41} to their social networks from their personal Twitter accounts. They also made the recommendations to support civil society actors who are working on human rights of young people and youth unions to engage more in national and international human rights mechanisms as well as to establish a special human rights protection mechanism on digital space to support communication strategies and multimedia campaigns for combating hate speech and enhancing equality.\textsuperscript{42}

In this context, the facilitator could also watch the #Faith4Rights Webinar during the Peace Media Law Moot Court Competition 2022, which included a Research and Policy Manager of Meta’s Oversight Board Administration who explained decisions about content moderation of hate speech on Facebook and 56; as well as the Committee’s Concluding Observations, UN Doc. CCPR/C/JPN/CO/7, paras. 38–39.

\textsuperscript{39} European Court of Human Rights, Herrmann v. Germany, Application No. 9300/07, judgment of 26 June 2012.

\textsuperscript{40} OHCHR, Promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet: ways to bridge the gender digital divide from a human rights perspective (2017), UN Doc. A/HRC/35/9, para. 3.


Meta has indicated that it looks to authorities such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the Rabat Plan of Action when making content decisions. The Oversight Board has also drawn upon the six factors from the Rabat Plan of Action to assess the capacity of speech to create a serious risk of inciting discrimination, violence or other lawless action. ‘New technologies—including digital broadcasting, mobile telephony, the Internet and social networks—vastly enhance the dissemination of information’, however, the Rabat Plan of Action also flagged the importance of combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence, and violence against persons based on religion or belief (Human Rights Council resolution 16/18) with constant follow-up at the national and international levels. Similarly, in an open letter of 5 November 2022, High Commissioner Volker Türk called for Twitter’s content moderation policies to continue barring hatred that incites discrimination, hostility or violence on the platform, and he stressed that ‘hate speech has spread like wildfire on social media platforms in countries with starkly different cultural, political and religious contexts—with horrific, life-threatening consequences for thousands of people’.

In addition, the Council of Europe’s 2022 recommendation to member States on combating hate speech also builds on the six criteria of the Rabat Plan of Action, and with regard to human rights education the UN “Faith for Rights”
framework and toolkit with its peer-to-peer learning methodology is labelled a ‘useful tool’. Given the particular exposure of the youth to hate speech, the facilitator may wish to outline these global, regional and national standards in order to illustrate how the youth can individually contribute to countering incitement to hatred, while not undermining freedom of expression. Finally, the participants could focus on the misuse of anti-blasphemy laws and discuss the toolkit’s case to debate on blasphemy charges (Annex A) by applying the Rabat threshold test to this hypothetical scenario and using the hyperlinked online guides and calculators for analyzing hate speech.49

3.3 Students and Scholars
Students, especially those studying law or international relations, would certainly find the interdisciplinary “Faith for Rights” approach positively intriguing. They may be interested in discussing one of the more detailed moot court cases that are included in the #Faith4Rights toolkit in its Annexes H to M. These six hypothetical scenarios allude—and some explicitly refer—to the Rabat Plan of Action and the “Faith for Rights” framework, for example in the case of the Price Media Law Moot Court Competition 2020 regarding hate speech, artificial intelligence and conversion issues.50 Furthermore, the case of the Moot Court Competition by the Brazilian Center of Studies in Law and Religion quotes Commitment IV, calling on politicians and other stakeholders to prevent the use of ‘doctrinal secularism’ from reducing the space for religious or belief pluralism in practice.51 In addition, the hypothetical cases of the Nelson Mandela World Human Rights Moot Court Competition involve questions about religious symbols, protestors holding placards with the hashtag #Faith4Rights, as well as a tweet calling out misogyny that contravenes the 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights”.52 Organizing peer-to-peer learning events online or offline during such moot court competitions has also proven useful.

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51 Ibid., pp. 103–105, at p. 104.
since the participants are already familiar with related legal arguments that they have been researching for their written memorials and rehearsing for their oral presentations as applicant or respondent in the mooting competition. Shorter workshops or webinars may also focus on one of the toolkit’s cases to debate (Annexes A to G), which can be discussed during a session between an hour and 90 minutes.

In addition to moot courts, other innovative forms of peer-to-peer learning with students and scholars could involve massive open online courses (MOOC) and Masters programs. Their interactive implementation and stimulating discussions with a human rights-based approach are key. The #Faith4Rights toolkit refers to the MOOC on freedom of expression with almost 5,000 participants in 2021, organized by the Bonavero Institute at the University of Oxford and UNESCO. In addition, the University for Peace’s Master of Arts in Religion, Culture and Peace Studies (2021–2022) included a course on countering hate speech, which focused on the related hard law norms and soft law standards as well as discussed the toolkit’s case study on incitement to hatred by political and religious leaders during the pandemic. Since 2023, the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, in its Master in Transitional Justice and LLM programme, also offers a course on the tensions between freedoms of religion, belief and expression as well as gender equality, using the methodology of the #Faith4Rights toolkit.

Online, hybrid and offline elements can also be combined, for example by encouraging the participants to complete ahead of the peer-to-peer learning event the online course on the Gandhi-King Global Academy about...

54 University of Pretoria Centre for Human Rights, Invitation: Peer-to-peer learning webinar on #Faith4Rights (2021), available online at https://www.chr.up.ac.za/latest-news/2598-peer-to-peer-learning-webinar-on-faith4rights and video recording at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHFZounCnUg.
57 Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, Optional courses (2023), available online at https://www.geneva-academy.ch/masters/ll-m/programme/optional-courses.
‘Religions, Beliefs, and Human Rights’ or the “Faith for Rights” website of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies. This establishes a common knowledge basis and level playing field for all participants once the peer-to-peer learning event begins, thereby also saving time during the workshop or webinar. Furthermore, it may trigger useful questions and suggestions by the participants to focus on a specific thematic area, thereby tailoring the event to their personal interests and societal needs.

3.4 **Parliamentarians**

Organizing peer-to-peer learning events with members of parliaments is important because the tensions between beliefs and rights tend to divide lawmakers. The resulting legislative compromises often lead to conflicting jurisprudence. Parliamentarians are also potential victims of populism and election-related calculations. A better knowledge by parliamentarians of the complementarities between faith and rights is conducive to comparing national experiences and may even yield concrete legislative follow-up action. The 2023 Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue in Marrakesh also encouraged mapping best parliamentary practices, promoting inclusivity, fundamental human rights and gender equality within religious or belief communities, in line with national legislation and international commitments, exploring avenues for the implementation of UN strategies and resolutions on interfaith and intercultural dialogue, as well as addressing implementation gaps at the national level.

In preparation of a peer-to-peer learning event with parliamentarians, the facilitator may wish to use the resources of the ‘Leave No One Behind’ dialogue series in 2021–2022, which was co-organized by the Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Network, International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Religions for Peace, African Parliamentarians for Human Rights, the “Faith for Rights” Initiative and the Danish Institute

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for Human Rights.61 This dialogue series explored the interrelated topics of freedom of religion or belief and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), gender, education, civic space and freedom of expression, health and climate change. The thematic briefing papers for each of the six dialogues and their full video recordings provide useful resources for the facilitator and participants.62 Current or former parliamentarians, religious leaders and faith-based actors shared their experiences, exploring any gaps and opportunities towards action. As a follow-up, more than 100 signatories called in their public statement to integrate religious or belief communities’ experiences of inequality and needs into SDG planning, policy and action at a country level so that no one is left behind.63

In this context, the #Faith4Rights toolkit suggests a role play about collective apprehensions by a religious minority against perceived police brutalities in the hypothetical State of Polis and a draft law prohibiting arms, even if licensed, in places of worship.64 The participants could simulate a parliamentary hearing of the different views in order to inform the legislative process on the draft law, playing various roles for example as a member of parliament, a religious leader or an atheist civil society activist, respectively. The facilitator may ask participants to use the existing procedural options in their own country or to invent such a consultative process.

Another peer-to-peer learning exercise for parliamentarians could be to ask the participants to draft constitutional provisions on freedom of religion or belief as well as come up with an ‘ideal’ legal relationship between the State and religion(s).65 The facilitator could help them by asking pertinent questions, based on real-life examples from Constitutions around the globe, which illustrate good practices but also the potential pitfalls of certain formulations.66

As flagged in Commitment IV, both the notions of “State religion” and “doctrinal

62 See https://www.ippforb.com/resources.
63 International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Global Commitment to Ensure ‘No One is Left Behind’ on the Basis of their Religion or Belief (2022), available online at https://www.ippforb.com/newsroom/2022/29/06global-commitment-to-ensure-no-one-is-left-behind-on-the-basis-of-their-religion-or-belief.
65 Ibid., p. 29.
secularism” may lead to discriminating against minorities or reducing the space for diversity of religions and beliefs. Yet, drafting non-discriminatory laws is easier said than done. It requires comprehensive consultations, notably with inputs from religious or belief minorities and other disadvantaged groups. The facilitator should also try to raise awareness about possible discrimination in applying such laws and how to prevent any authoritarian abuse through devising institutional safeguards and ensuring meaningful control by judicial, legislative or administrative institutions. In this regard, the UN publication on ‘Human Rights and Constitution Making’ provides useful guidance on a rights-based approach to constitutional reform and how to draft a constitutional bill of rights, including freedom of religion or belief.

3.5 Judges and Prosecutors
A peer-to-peer learning event with judges and prosecutors is important to compare notes on the fluctuating judicial precedents in the complex areas of religion and human rights. Their peer-to-peer learning should ideally also involve discussing real or hypothetical cases concerning religious or belief issues. The related jurisprudence of international human rights mechanisms and regional courts may not be fully known by the participants and could enrich their thinking. Therefore the facilitator may wish to check online databases for any pertinent decisions with regard to the participants' State(s) from UN treaty bodies, communications by Special Procedures, recommendations through the Universal Periodic Review and judgements from regional human rights courts. Concluding observations by UN treaty bodies and OHCHR reports may include specific guidance on the application of domestic laws.

in order to ensure their compliance with international human rights norms and standards. For example, the UN Human Rights Committee has criticized a domestic anti-blasphemy law, even though it had been upheld by the country’s Constitutional Court, and the UN Committee reiterated its view that this law was ‘inconsistent with the provisions of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights] and that it should be repealed forthwith’.71 With regard to freedom of conscientious objection to military service, OHCHR concluded that:

After any decision on conscientious objector status, there should always be a right to appeal to an independent civilian judicial body; (m) Conscientious objectors should not be repeatedly punished for not having obeyed a renewed order to serve in the military; (n) States should release individuals who are imprisoned or detained solely based on their conscientious objection to military service.72

Such national and international examples could be discussed further by the participants, also in view of their own experiences and domestic case law.

Yet, it seems less confrontational and more conducive to an open debate if the facilitator presents a hypothetical case study, which is invented but may be inspired by several national practices. The #Faith4Rights toolkit includes some cases to debate on blasphemy charges, secularism and hate speech,73 which may be interesting for peer-to-peer learning events with judges and prosecutors. If time permits, they could also discuss one of the more detailed moot court cases,74 which resemble—due to their adversarial nature—to the work of judges, prosecutors and lawyers. The participants could thus divide themselves into three groups, representing the mooting applicant, respondent and bench of judges, respectively. At the end of the session, the facilitator may wish to provide feedback on the discussion and add any arguments or precedents from international and regional jurisprudence. In follow-up, the judges and prosecutors will be well-equipped to take into consideration relevant international human rights norms, standards and case law in their national context.

71 Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the initial report of Indonesia (2013), UN Doc. CCPR/C/IDN/CO/1, para. 25; Human Rights Committee, List of issues prior to submission of the second periodic report of Indonesia (2020), UN Doc. CCPR/C/IDN/QPR/2, para. 18.
72 OHCHR, Conscientious objection to military service (2022), UN Doc. A/HRC/50/43, para. 57.
74 Ibid., pp. 97–122.
3.6 Civil Servants

Another key stakeholder with a high potential for directly influencing policies and practices are civil servants. Regardless of the content of laws and public policies in the areas of social cohesion and the management of cultural and religious diversity, it is ultimately the quality of civil servants who implement related legislation and public policies that determines the achievement of their goals. Peer-to-peer learning for civil servants in the area of management of cultural and religious diversity is a *conditio sine qua non* for peaceful societies where religious and other minorities are fully respected and integrated in the socio-cultural fabric of our increasingly diverse societies. Such peer-to-peer learning events may target a variety of civil servants, from different countries, regions, departments, levels of seniority, gender, religious or belief affiliation etc. Ideally, such diversity is reflected among the participants since their complementary or contrasting perspectives may enrich the discussions. It is also beneficial to include the voices of domestic civil society and international human rights mechanisms in such peer-to-peer learning. Both perspectives help for objectively evaluating national policies. The Universal Human Rights Index provides a useful updated tool to discover how international human rights mechanisms evaluate national policies and practices in different human rights areas.75

In this regard, the facilitator could select examples from policy reviews that address the participants’ interests and needs. One example arose from the interactive dialogue in 2017 between the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the delegation of Nigeria. The Minister of Women and Social Development explained to the Committee in Geneva her Government’s efforts to raise religious leaders’ awareness of the importance of amending discriminatory marriage laws.76 Committee members then drew the delegation’s attention to the Rabat Plan of Action and the “Faith for Rights” framework, which could serve as useful tools in encouraging different faith communities to work together to promote human rights, and they asked about measures to increase support for gender-related awareness-raising programmes among women’s groups, local communities, traditional and religious leaders, prominent male figures, teachers and members of the media.77 In its concluding observations, the Committee recommended expediting ‘the repeal or amendment of all discriminatory laws identified by the Nigerian Law Reform Commission and include religious leaders in the process of

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75 See https://uhri.ohchr.org/.
76 UN Doc. CEDAW/C/SG.1518, para. 14.
77 UN Doc. CEDAW/C/SG.1518, paras. 16 and 43.
addressing issues of faith and human rights, so as to build on several “faith for rights” initiatives and identify common ground among all religions in the State party, as acknowledged by the delegation.78 This recommendation and concrete options for implementation were discussed in 2020–2021 during several peer-to-peer learning events at Bauchi State University with civil servants from different regions of Nigeria.79

In this context, as an indicator of increased recognition of the role of religious actors, the facilitator could also refer to the European Union’s Gender Action Plan III (2020), which encourages ‘cooperation with a broad range of actors, such as local authorities and civil society organisations, women’s rights activists, human rights defenders, young people, religious and faith-based organisations’ and it explicitly calls on the EU to ‘support mobilisation of religious actors for gender equality in line with the Faith for Rights framework’.80 In follow-up, OHCHR and the European Commission Directorate-General for International Partnerships organized a series of peer-to-peer learning events in 2021 on using the #Faith4Rights toolkit in the context of the EU Gender Action Plan.81

These examples also illustrate the bridges that should be built between faith-based actors and communities, civil society advocates, human rights experts and civil servants. The facilitator could conclude the peer-to-peer learning session by stressing the importance of linking the discussions in Geneva, New York and capital cities with the daily work of civil servants and civil society at the grassroots level. Participants could share their concrete experiences and brainstorm together about creative ideas for implementing the recommendations by UN treaty bodies, special procedures and the universal periodic review in their local contexts. Contrasting expectation with realities is instructive and productive and can best be exercised at the grass-root level.

79 OHCHR, Report on the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (2021), UN Doc. A/HRC/49/36, para. 68.
3.7 Diplomats

The role of diplomats in handling religious issues in the multilateral context is crucial. The challenge in this aspect is that diplomats, even when they are well equipped to provide solutions, may be tempted to reflect the existing divides rather than resolving them. They are also sometimes more tuned to “defend” the reputation and praise the policies of their respective countries rather than engaging in a substantive discussion about specific challenges on complex matters such as religion. Diplomats, however, are well placed for sharing national experiences in an analytical introspective manner that facilitates bridging the divides on religion in international negotiations, as evidenced in numerous situations across the globe and at UN headquarters. Diplomats are more likely to engage in such an interactive peer-to-peer learning mode when the space in which they engage is designed for a dynamic brainstorming instead of delivering formal statements. This was the case during the regional workshops organized by OHCHR in implementation of High Commissioner Navy Pillay’s report to the Durban Review Conference in 2009. States were invited as observers and this relieved them from the political tension related to the outcome of these consultations that were experts-led and resulted in the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. This plan was also captured and expanded by Commitment VII within the “Faith for Rights” framework.

In this context, the facilitator could give some examples from the Human Rights Council, Forum on Minority Issues and Special Procedures. In 2018, the High Commissioner’s update on the situation of human rights of Rohingya people called upon the Government of Myanmar to

increase efforts further to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence in all sectors of society in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 16/18 and the Rabat Plan of Action. In addition, the Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments on “Faith for Rights” can be useful to address advocacy of hatred that incites to violence, discrimination or hostility, particularly when it is conducted in the name of religion or belief.

83 Rabat Plan of Action, UN Doc. A/HRC/22/17/Add.4, appendix.
84 UN Doc. A/HRC/38/CRP.2, para. 49.
The Human Rights Council took up this recommendation in its annual resolutions on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, each of which explicitly refer to the Rabat Plan of Action.\(^8^5\) This shows that diplomats need to be aware of various relevant soft law standards in the area of freedom of religion of belief to be able to resolve conflicts that have a religious component. Diplomats can also play an important follow-up role if they regularly make related recommendations to their national mechanisms in preparation for their reporting to various regional and international human rights mechanisms. It is important for diplomats to remember that this national level follow-up function to the resolutions they negotiate internationally adds credibility and impact to their work and enhances the progressive development of human rights law.

In a similar vein, the 2021 Forum on Minority Issues enumerated the Rabat Plan of Action and Beirut Declaration as reference instruments for preventing conflicts involving minorities.\(^8^6\) The Forum encouraged ‘States, the United Nations, international and regional organizations and civil society … to work closely in supporting the positive contributions of faith-based actors, including through the promotion of the Beirut Declaration and the faith for rights toolkit’.\(^8^7\) Again, part of this formulation was picked up by the Human Rights Council in its 2022 resolution on prevention of genocide.\(^8^8\) Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed also highlighted in his 2022 report the role of religious leaders, influencers and other civil society actors in promoting reconciliation, peacebuilding and conflict prevention through constructive discourse and other interfaith initiatives, such as the “Faith for Rights” framework which aims at exchanging practices, engaging in interfaith projects and collectively promoting human rights.\(^8^9\) Furthermore, he called on States to prohibit incitement—online and offline—to discrimination, hostility, or violence based on religion or belief, consistent with international human rights law and standards, including Human Rights Council resolution 16/18, the Rabat Plan of Action as well as Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments on “Faith for Rights”.\(^9^0\) Civil society, including faith-based actors, should promote interfaith engagement—for example through the #Faith4Rights framework—and ‘promote inclusive, peaceful and just conflict resolutions and to prevent tensions

\(^8^5\) UN Docs. A/hrc/res/43/26, para. 26; A/hrc/res/46/21, para. 34; A/hrc/res/49/23, para. 26; A/hrc/res/52/31, para. 36.

\(^8^6\) UN Doc. A/hrc/49/81, para. 3.

\(^8^7\) Ibid., para. 58.

\(^8^8\) UN Doc. A/hrc/res/49/9, operative para. 22.

\(^8^9\) UN Doc. A/hrc/49/44, para. 66.

\(^9^0\) Ibid., para. 78(b).
arising, particularly where conducted in the name of religion or belief.\textsuperscript{91} The #Faith4Rights toolkit provides a concrete peer-to-peer learning methodology for achieving the above goals in a manner that is adaptable to different situations. Its added value is the dedicated rights-based approach for bringing together the two worlds of faith and human rights in order to facilitate measurable changes on the ground rather than focussing only on inter-religious dialogue as such.\textsuperscript{92}

3.8 UN Independent Experts and Secretariat of Regional or International Organizations

United Nations independent human rights experts have a crucial role to play in rendering the interaction between beliefs and rights more mutually reinforcing rather than exclusive. However, independent experts can legitimately hold very different views about how far and in which way should they address arguments of religious nature. Quite often, international human rights experts find it delicate and difficult to discuss inadmissible reservations on human rights treaties when they are invoked in the name of religion or belief. This occurs also during the reviews of States by treaty bodies.

The same applies to staff members of regional and international organizations whose programs of activities often necessitate engagement with faith actors for which they are not necessarily well prepared. This has led the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development to organize annual Strategic Learning Exchanges on Faith and Development since 2010.\textsuperscript{93} These trainings share experiences and lessons learned based from different UN entities concerning partnerships with, or outreach to, faith-based communities. This also responds to the recommendation by the UN Secretary-General in 2013 to conduct human rights training initiatives for United Nations staff and others to enhance inter-religious dialogue and to build knowledge on multiple

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., para. 80.
forms of discrimination and protection of minorities.\textsuperscript{94} The Secretary-General's Guidance Note stressed the need for tailoring the training activities and incorporating recommendations by Treaty Bodies, Special Procedures and other human rights mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review:

General references to human rights or the principle of non-discrimination only are not sufficient for effective training while consistent references to the relevant human rights instruments and mechanisms will enable the participants to acquire a better understanding of racial discrimination and protection of minorities.\textsuperscript{95}

Ten years later, the Special Rapporteur on minority issues urged ‘the United Nations to mainstream and integrate in the training of United Nations staff, where appropriate, especially in its work at the global, regional and country levels, the #Faith4Rights toolkit, in particular module 6 on minorities’.\textsuperscript{96}

In 2023, more than 100 UN personnel participated in a webinar on freedom of expression in the digital age and the “Faith for Rights” framework, and OHCHR subsequently organized a peer-to-peer learning session with the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, OHCHR staff and minority fellows, who shared their experiences on engaging with religious or belief minorities in the field and at headquarters.

In addition to the above-mentioned examples of a “Faith for Rights” approach by the Human Rights Council and its Special Rapporteurs, also UN Treaty Bodies have been using the Rabat Plan of Action and Beirut Declaration in their monitoring and standard setting. The facilitator of a peer-to-peer learning event could refer to the related discussions between members of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and representatives from States parties, including Botswana, Costa Rica, Fiji, the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{95} \textit{Ibid.}, para. 54; see also para. 13, which refers to States parties’ obligations under human rights treaties and the relevant recommendations by treaty bodies, special procedures and other human rights mechanisms.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Fernand de Varennes, \textit{Strengthening and mainstreaming the protection of the rights of minorities at the United Nations: an assessment of the implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (2023)}, UN Doc. A/HRC/52/27, para. 73.
\end{itemize}
Gambia, Niger and Nigeria.\textsuperscript{97} In addition, the UN Human Rights Committee has used the Rabat threshold test and Beirut Declaration for the difficult question of defining what is a “peaceful assembly”. The facilitator could highlight the importance of clear guidance in order to avoid undue limitations of freedom of expression and other human rights, especially if authoritarian governments try to stifle any criticism and dissent. In this context, the six-part threshold test of the Rabat Plan of Action facilitates catching the “real” cases of incitement to hatred and violence, while fully protecting the right of peaceful assembly and freedoms of religion, belief, expression and association. This is also the approach taken by the Human Rights Committee in its General Comment No. 37 on the right of peaceful assembly, adopted in July 2020, which explicitly refers in its footnote to the Rabat and Beirut standards:

In accordance with article 20 of the Covenant, peaceful assemblies may not be used for propaganda for war (art. 20 (1)), or for advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence (art. 20 (2)). As far as possible, action should be taken in such cases against the individual perpetrators, rather than against the assembly as a whole. Participation in assemblies whose dominant message falls within the scope of article 20 must be addressed in conformity with the requirements for restrictions set out in articles 19 and 21.\textsuperscript{98}

A concrete peer-to-peer learning exercise could be for the participants to draft a shadow report by civil society organizations to a UN Treaty Body, from an advocacy perspective, based on the lived experiences in their home countries and real human rights problems, for example related to gender equality and hate speech. The facilitator should also briefly explain the working methods of UN treaty bodies\textsuperscript{99} and how to maximize the chances of civil society inputs getting picked up in the list of issues and concluding observations of the committees. Participants should also be strategic and check the reporting calendar when the State party is due to be considered by the UN treaty body in question.

\textsuperscript{98} UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/37, para. 50, with footnote 60 referring to ‘the Rabat Plan of Action, para. 29, and the Beirut Declaration on Faith for Rights (A/HRC/40/58, annexes i and ii)’.
and what the deadlines are for civil society submissions. If the timing works out, participants may also wish to submit the shadow report they drafted during the peer-to-peer learning event to the committee in question and thus inform the work of UN treaty bodies in real life. On the other hand, participants may discover that their home country has not ratified a specific human rights treaty or has not opened the possibility for considering communications on individual cases. The facilitator could then explore together with the participants any other avenues for raising the human rights situation or cases to UN bodies such as Special Rapporteurs or the Universal Periodic Review.

3.9 National Human Rights Institutions

National human rights institutions (NHRIs) are the most evident and legitimate actor to reconcile tensions within a State between religious interpretations and human rights through constant dialogue and creative methodologies. Relationships at the national level between NHRIs and the State’s religious institutions are of utmost importance and deserve far more attention than what a usual “secular reflex” may provide. NHRIs should also be in constant engagement with non-state faith-based actors at the national level and can take up individual cases or address systematic discrimination emanating from State practice or extremist interpretations of religion or beliefs. It is important to stress in this vein that, in many parts of the world, most tensions between freedom of religion or belief and other human rights emanate from positions and actions by radical non-state faith-based actors. Hence the importance of the role of NHRIs to facilitate constructive dialogues and build solid bridges between State religious institutions, non-state faith-based actors and relevant human rights actors at the national level. Engaging with non-state faith-based actors is often risky and requires special precautions. This point could become a subject of discussion with NHRi representatives to compare notes on various experiences and lessons learned.

In follow-up to the previous peer-to-peer learning exercise, the facilitator could ask the participants to research about the mandate of their national human rights institution and draft a submission on a pertinent human rights issue that relates to, or is impacted by, religious factors and/or actors. A related sub-question for an interesting discussion could be whether and to which degree NHRIs need a dedicated knowledge/research capacity on religious matters to be able to conduct meaningful discussions on equal footing with faith-based actors. The facilitator may give some background on the Paris Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions, notably concerning the composition and guarantees of independence and pluralism, including of different trends in philosophical or religious thought:
The composition of the national institution and the appointment of its members, whether by means of an election or otherwise, shall be established in accordance with a procedure which affords all necessary guarantees to ensure the pluralist representation of the social forces (of civilian society) involved in the promotion and protection of human rights, particularly by powers which will enable effective cooperation to be established with, or through the presence of, representatives of:

(a) Non-governmental organizations responsible for human rights and efforts to combat racial discrimination, trade unions, concerned social and professional organizations, for example, associations of lawyers, doctors, journalists and eminent scientists;
(b) Trends in philosophical or religious thought;
(c) Universities and qualified experts;
(d) Parliament;
(e) Government departments (if these are included, their representatives should participate in the deliberations only in an advisory capacity).

As the peer-to-peer learning event ideally also includes NHRI representatives, they may wish to explain how the Paris Principles’ guidance on composition and guarantees of independence and pluralism work in practice. They could also describe how the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), through its Sub-Committee on Accreditation, reviews and accredits NHRI in the peer-based process which is undertaken by NHRI representatives from Africa, Americas, Asia-Pacific and Europe. The European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHR) through its Sub-Committee on Accreditation, reviews and accredits NHRI in the peer-based process which is undertaken by NHRI representatives from Africa, Americas, Asia-Pacific and Europe. Would religious institutions need a comparable set of criteria to ensure their political independence and financial transparency and sustainability? In addition to reflecting on such a difficult question, participants may also share any experiences in engaging with religious actors, both public and non-state actors.

Participants can also share their experiences, if any, in engaging with de facto human rights bodies, such as ombudsperson institutions in situations where the State is no longer controlling parts of its internationally recognized territory; a recent publication by the European Network of NHRI flags in this context that:

[t]he human rights of individuals who live in these territories are especially at risk, given the cultural, ethnic, religious, political tensions that often characterise these situations and a lack of effective remedies and meaningful access to regional and international human rights protection mechanisms.102

Participants of a peer-to-peer learning event could compare and contrast the experiences of persons belonging to religious or belief minorities in various protracted conflicts and with a specific focus on freedom of conscientious objection to military service.103

3.10  Faith-Based Actors
Quoting the 1981 Declaration and “Faith for Rights” framework, Special Rapporteur Nazila Ghanea stressed that no one must be subject to discrimination by any State, institution, group of persons or person on the grounds of religion or belief, which establishes direct responsibilities of religious institutions, leaders and even each individual within religious or belief communities.104 Yet, they may not only be duty-bearers but also rights-holders.

Faith-based actors are the category of stakeholders that need the “Faith for Rights” framework most compellingly. They are also among the best-placed stakeholders for enriching and developing the #Faith4Rights toolkit, both in terms of methodological approaches and substantive modules. After all, the framework is meant to empower faith-based actors to become who they really are, i.e. defenders of human dignity and equal rights for everyone, inspired by a set of sacred values. The term “faith-based actors” encompasses a wide range of persons. It is so broad that it essentially includes individual believers and all those who may wish to define themselves as faith-based actors. It is of crucial importance for facilitators to start any engagement with them by

a strategic reminder, which is too often forgotten, that international human rights law equally protects theistic, non-theistic, atheistic or any other believers. This foundational premise is at the heart of the “Faith for Rights” framework, which is also highlighted in its Commitment II. The UN Human Rights Committee commented already in 1993 that article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ‘is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions’.\textsuperscript{105} UN Treaty Bodies and Special Rapporteurs have clarified that not only followers of traditional theistic religions are protected but also agnostics, animists, atheists, free thinkers, humanists, new religious movements, religious minorities, secularists and non-theistic believers. This wide and inclusive scope of protection of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief should also be borne in mind by the facilitators of peer-to-peer learning events.

One practical challenge for the facilitator may be that they do not know the backgrounds of all participants in advance of the peer-to-peer learning event. As mentioned above, the introductory round should be designed to give the facilitator some indications about the participants’ identities, their experiences related to the “Faith for Rights” framework and expectations from the peer learning session. These can be the three questions through which participants introduce themselves in three minutes each. Yet their substantive ideas could be elucidated further through the initial “positioning exercise”, in which the facilitator asks participants to position themselves either in the left corner of the room if they think that “religion is part of the problem” or in the right corner if they consider religion being part of the solution (or somewhere in the middle). Other possible questions by the facilitator could be if religion or rights are more important to them as well as if they think that faith and rights are complementary or rather separate from each other.\textsuperscript{106} While this “positioning exercise” is suitable as an icebreaker at the beginning of the workshop, the facilitator could also ask the same questions again at its end, which would allow each participant to see if the peer-to-peer learning event has ultimately changed his or her position(s).

3.11 Human Rights Defenders

The notions of “faith-based actors” and “human rights defenders” should not be regarded as separate or irreconcilable. On the contrary, the Beirut

\textsuperscript{105} Human Rights Committee, \textit{General Comment No. 22: Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion} (1993), UN Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, para. 2.

Declaration on “Faith for Rights” precisely aims at enabling faith-based actors to assume their responsibilities and natural role as human rights defenders at the national and international levels. Supported by religious quotes from the Old Testament and from the Qurʾān, the Beirut Declaration stresses the duty ‘to practice what we preach, to fully engage, to speak up and act on the ground in the defence of human dignity long before it is actually threatened’.

Against this background, the facilitator of a peer-to-peer learning event could ask participants to add further pertinent faith quotes, either from their own or other traditions, that support these human rights commitments. As the #Faith4Rights toolkit puts it, the ‘aim of this exercise is to widen the cultural and spiritual foundation of modern human rights norms by grounding them in corresponding faith traditions’.

The facilitator could also try to demystify them by comparing the terms “faith-based actors” and “human rights defenders”, for example by asking if and how their perceived dichotomy could be resolved in practice. Is one of them just a secular version of the other? This question may lead participants to challenge the underlying stereotypes that faith-based actors are mainly seen as conservative theistic pressure groups, whereas most human rights defenders are considered to be liberal-minded ultra-secular activists influenced by Western thinking. The facilitator could also encourage a brainstorming about the positive roles of faith-based actors as human rights defenders through simulating an “Advice to the President”: Each participant should draft—a proposal for outreach and awareness-raising about the 18 Commitments or any additional pledges on “Faith for Rights”. Participants present their own proposals briefly and then evaluate their peers’ ideas on the basis of the following seven criteria: (1) conciseness, (2) clarity, (3) action-orientation, (4) substantiation of the

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107 Beirut Declaration on ‘Faith for Rights’ (2017), UN Doc. A/HRC/40/58, annex 1, para. 8. See also para. 3: ‘Religious, ethical and philosophical texts preceded international law in upholding the oneness of humankind, the sacredness of the right to life and the corresponding individual and collective duties that are grounded in the hearts of believers’.

108 Ibid., para. 14, quoting ‘Oh you believers, why don’t you practice what you preach? Most hateful for God is preaching what you don’t practice.’ (Qurʾān 61: 2–3) and ‘Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.’ (Proverbs 31:8–9).


110 Ibid., p. 20: ‘Perceptions about religions are often negative in the human rights sphere and vice versa. The mainstream view, in both disciplines, seems to conceive them in a competition mode: one is divine while the other is human-made. In addition, the human rights environment is projected as secular and liberal. Religions, in the general stereotype, are rather associated with conservatism’.

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proposal by standards and material provided by the #Faith4Rights toolkit, (5) practical feasibility, (6) description of action points needed to implement the proposal and (7) how to measure its impact. Designing, presenting and evaluating themselves the proposals in this peer-to-peer learning exercise actually prepares the participants for working as faith-based human rights defenders also in their everyday lives.

3.12  Peer-Learning Facilitators

Lastly, but not least important, peer-learning facilitators may themselves also be the target audience of peer-to-peer learning events. The main features of the “Faith for Rights” framework are the complexities of its contextualisation and the sensitive nature of controversial issues that are also of inter-disciplinary nature between religious and human rights studies. Complex and controversial questions may often arise during the peer-to-peer learning encounters. This is a good sign, provided facilitators are well equipped to handle controversial issues. In view of the demanding tasks of facilitators, as they need to be well grounded in both disciplines of beliefs and rights, it is vital for them to exchange good practices and lessons learned from facilitating related workshops or webinars. An informal network of facilitators and community of practice for online, offline and hybrid peer-to-peer learning on “Faith for Rights” has naturally developed through three meetings in Collonges during the piloting phase of the #Faith4Rights toolkit, convened by OHCHR. Continuing such engagement among facilitators enriches their respective expertise and often promotes synergies between existing programs. The facilitators should frankly analyze what works and what does not. They could also share hypothetical cases that they have adapted to specific contexts or target audiences.

At the meta-level, facilitators may also wish to explore jointly drafting new cases to debate, inspired by their respective national environments and experiences of facilitating peer learning. Such hypothetical cases may also capture new judicial precedents from national and regional courts or UN human rights mechanisms. In all cases, the hypothetical scenario should ideally be in a grey area, which allows both sides of an adversarial debate, for example between applicants and respondents in a moot court competition, to come up with legal arguments in their favour. This collaborative approach enables genuine peer-to-peer learning for all participants, including the facilitators themselves.

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111  Ibid., p. 87.
4 Call for Inclusive Human Rights ‘Diplocacy’ Based on Peer-learning

The above wide range of different stakeholders who are potential users and beneficiaries of the “Faith for Rights” framework indicates the vast differences among their characteristics. Interdisciplinarity, inclusiveness, contextualization and cultural sensitivity are therefore indispensable for reconciling religion and human rights. Both spheres witness normal tensions, but this should not hide a much larger potential of mutual reinforcement. This is unfortunately not yet the predominant trend in thinking and in practice. What is more likely to occur is that religion and human rights are often politically manipulated against each other. In 2015, Professor Cherif Bassiouni gave a precious advice that is equally important for diplomats. He suggested to the co-authors of this article to analyze failure stories and worst practices in this area and to build on decades of expertise by all relevant stakeholders. What does not work in the area of religion and human rights is dogmatism, fragmented initiatives for opportunistic reasons, theological debates even in “good faith”, conversion overshadowing convergence, superficial dialogues that only provide photo opportunities, and the denial that objective tensions do exist between human interpretations of religions, beliefs and human rights.

Based on the above lessons learned, inter-faith and intra-faith engagement needs to be knowledge-based in substance, as well as broad and inclusive in terms of the involved religions, beliefs, gender, opinions, origins and other status of the participants and facilitators. Interdisciplinarity is also a prerequisite for optimizing the mutual reinforcement between religion and human rights. The human rights movement needs to be culturally sensitive and humble enough to admit that all cultures are equal and contribute to defending human rights in a variety of approaches. The effectiveness of human rights is hampered by absolutism and conformism. The religious discourse also needs enhanced critical thinking to cope with challenging developments of our time. The effectiveness of the religious narrative is hampered by dogmatism and exclusivity.

One of the main obstacles in the religious sphere is that it rarely reflects diversity. With regard to the representativity of faith-based actors, Azza Karam rightly highlights the difference between religious institutions—largely male dominated and rife with internal power dynamics—and non-formal religious actors serving at the heart of their communities. With and to whom are we actually talking when we are speaking with representatives of faith-based
organisations (FBOs)? Moreover, who is excluded from the dialogue and consultation tables? Further, to what extent is the outreach taking into consideration or, indeed, contributing to issues of asymmetries of power among religious groups and communities?\textsuperscript{112}

The #Faith4Rights toolkit therefore stresses the importance of inclusivity, diversity and pluralism, based on the fundamental contribution of human rights law to religious diversity through the broad definition of religion or belief under international human rights law. Transforming this equal worth of all beliefs from theory to practice required a new shared narrative and a common ground for joint action among believers in religion and in rights at the same time. The ‘universal human rights norms and the “Faith for Rights” framework provide such common platform\textsuperscript{113} for interfaith engagement and joint action. Following a “Faith for Rights” approach in an inclusive manner could ultimately lead to impactful diplocacy, i.e. a strategic combination of diplomacy and advocacy for human rights. Such optimal mobilisation of all value systems for their shared objective of equal human dignity is the best way to deblock protracted conflicts as well as to de-bloc inherited religious alliances or animosities between certain blocs. Human rights diplocacy relies on three pillars: diplomacy, advocacy and knowledge generated through peer-to-peer learning. This combination is well suited to facilitate a technical deep-log analysis of any underlying problems and tensions in increasingly multi-religious societies which are interconnected through social media.

With the neologism diplocacy we would like to allude to these important facets of human rights engagement with the various duty-bearers and rights-holders. Diplomats, UN independent experts, faith-based actors and other civil society representatives may thus jointly promote, protect and respect human rights, not only through quiet diplomacy or public advocacy, and certainly not through the simplistic motto of naming and shaming, but also ‘through dialogue in a pragmatic problem-solving mode’ and with substantive knowledge based on constructive engagement and ‘comparative analysis, enriched by research that generates empirical evidence and pragmatic solutions’.\textsuperscript{114}


UN Secretary-General António Guterres also stressed in his Call to Action for Human Rights the overall purpose of achieving positive impact: ‘This means being open to all available channels and opportunities to engage. There is a place for negotiations behind the scenes, a place for building and strengthening national capacities, a place for supporting different stakeholders, and a time when speaking out is essential.’\textsuperscript{115} In this context, engaging with the Security Council as well as creatively leveraging the full spectrum of other tools, channels and actors is vital in order ‘to raise awareness, prevent crisis and protect people effectively.’\textsuperscript{116} In a similar vein, the Security Council on 14 June 2023 encouraged the Secretary-General to carry out and refer to:

lessons learned and best practices on participation of religious groups, institutions and leaders, including women, as well as local communities, in the mediation of peace agreements and their implementation, in initiatives directed to conflict prevention, resolution, reconciliation, reconstruction, peacebuilding and in addressing the root causes of conflict.\textsuperscript{117}

Lastly, UN Special Rapporteur Nazila Ghanea outlined in her 2023 report to the Human Rights Council several useful methods of diplomacy for advancing freedom of religion or belief. What is needed, according to the Special Rapporteur, is a combination of monitoring, assessing and reporting; conducting behind-the-scenes bilateral engagement and political dialogue; engaging in multilateral forums; issuing demarches and public diplomacy; providing education, training and capacity-building; supporting civil society organizations through external financial instruments; and cooperating with freedom of religion or belief actors.\textsuperscript{118} She notably recommended that States ‘(a) Achieve coherence in domestic and foreign policy efforts in this field to the highest extent possible through public advocacy, as well as the effective implementation of policy, legal and institutional measures’ as well as that international


\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{117} Security Council Resolution 2686 (2023), UN Doc. S/RES/2686 (2023), operative para. 15.

\textsuperscript{118} Nazila Ghanea, \textit{Landscape of freedom of religion or belief: Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief} (2023), UN Doc. A/HRC/52/38, paras. 57–78.
organizations and multilateral institutions ‘(b) Lend support and encouragement to other actors to grow their capacity and human-rights based work in this area.’\textsuperscript{119}

The difference between the traditional diplomacy and the needed diplomacy lies precisely in the scope of the toolboxes that are used. In this context, States, UN, international and regional organizations as well as civil society should work closely together to support the positive contributions of faith-based actors, including through promoting the Beirut Declaration and the peer-to-peer learning methodology of the #Faith4Rights toolkit.

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\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Ibid.}, paras. 80 (a) and 81 (b).