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## THE FAITH WE SHARE AND THE WORLD WE WANT

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Successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will require healthy, resilient and sustainable local communities everywhere.

Focusing on the health, resilience and sustainability of local communities enables us to address the problem of disparities between rich and poor in every part of the world, along with the negative ecological effects of human activities close to home.

While the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development requires significant improvements in the standard of living of many people, shared values beyond material ones will be at the core of such communities. The health of a community involves more than physical needs, embracing all of the psychological and spiritual dimensions of people living together and with -- not against -- the Earth.

Using a familiar term, well-being must be at the heart of healthy, resilient, sustainable local communities, regardless of whether these communities are found in developed or in developing countries. Well-being goes beyond material indicators to embrace the values necessary for sustainable production and consumption as well as those for sustainable development.

Given the ways in which well-being is interwoven with religious expression across many cultures worldwide, it is not surprising that faith (or religion) is important to the health of many communities and to the well-being of individuals who live in them.

Successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development therefore requires the **recognition, mobilization** and **acceptance** of faith-based organizations (**FBOs**) as integral, intentional partners.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> While it is correct that there are many different forms of personal religious or spiritual expression (only some of which are found within the world's major religions), they must be located within a community to have significance for the implementation of the 2030 Development Agenda. Thus the term "faith-based organization" is understood to refer to the organized, communal dimension of religious expression, including that found within the traditional cultures of indigenous peoples.

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## Living Close to Home

The success of the first eight Sustainable Development Goals is entirely dependent on their realization in the contexts of local communities, primarily in developing countries. Whether it is ending extreme poverty (Goal 1); ending hunger (Goal 2); providing access to clean water and effective sanitation (Goal 6); ensuring reliable energy (Goal 7); providing education for all (Goal 4); achieving gender equity for women and girls (Goal 5) or work for all (Goal 8), all of them hinge on the promotion of healthy lives and well-being within the local community (Goal 3).

None of these are distant goals; they are reflected in the daily lives of people in the communities where they live, enhanced or undermined by the social, cultural, political and economic institutions that shape each place and how people there live together. With the exception of “well-being” in Goal 3, material measures and indicators of progress toward each goal may be identified and used in local contexts, close to home.

“Well-being” is another story, because while there are measures and indicators for physical health (such as rates of disease; mortality; and so on), there are no positive measures of psychological health. Beyond counting the number of diagnoses – something dependent on the existence of professionals who can make this assessment – neither psychological nor spiritual health have material benchmarks.

Despite the valiant efforts of some advocates, you simply can’t count “happy”. We can correlate misery with the lack of the necessities of life (hence the SDGs noted above) and address these physical concerns through improving the physical lives of people in their local communities, but we can’t correlate affluence with happiness. Rich people can be unhappy, just as poor people can be happy, with all stops possible in between. Well-being therefore deals with something other than material measures and indicators.

If we want to address “well-being” within local communities, we need to find another way to determine what it is and how to enhance it, towards fulfilling the 2030 Agenda.

## Don’t Worry, Just Be Happy

While sometimes all it takes is a song to make us happy, that is not enough when we are considering how to move the world’s population toward a sustainable future, one community at a time.

One of the causes of unhappiness, however, seems to be our fixation with material things. Emphasizing production as part of a mechanical paradigm of perpetual growth has led to an unsustainable global culture. Given the physical limits of the planet itself and our consumption of many non-renewable resources, other measures of our material prosperity (and our well-being) are required.

Whatever material indicators say about the ranking of any country on the Human Development Index, by themselves these indicators are not enough. Similarly, however Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or some economic equivalent is measured, it is not a sufficient measure of the well-being of the country itself or of any community within it – and still less of an indicator of the well-being of individuals. This is why in recent years there have been efforts to articulate some other set of indicators, some other means of combining quantitative and qualitative assessment of the health and well-being of communities. The Gross Happiness Index (inaugurated by Bhutan in 1972) is one such example of alternative metrics for assessing social wealth and well-being.

With all the different actors involved, there are obviously multiple pathways towards the realization of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. After all, sustainability is primarily a social and cultural problem, not a scientific or technological one. While economic and politics are entwined with any potential solutions, social and cultural institutions (including religious ones) will either prove to be friend or foe in efforts we make both towards sustainable development and sustainable consumption and production.



## Recognizing the Role of FBOs

Ecologists have observed “all adaption is local.” Not surprisingly, this fundamental ecological principle also applies to social adaptation and (most importantly) to social adaption in a climate-changing world.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, social development is also local.

These points are worth keeping in mind as the Sustainable Development Goals and targets are surveyed. While the 2030 Agenda was agreed to and approved at an international level by member states, its success will be observed and measured at the level of individuals living within their local communities in every country and region.

Successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda therefore must necessarily happen from the ground up, from the local level to successively larger contexts. The dilemma, of course, is that if both adaptation and development are local, what works in one area may or may not work as effectively elsewhere. The SDGs are global goals, after all.

Institutional efforts to promote sustainable development, as well as sustainable lifestyles, somehow must not only recognize local circumstances and the autonomy of the people who live there, but also find ways to mesh that local agenda with larger regional, national and global ones. Building a larger consensus requires the understanding and general acceptance of over-arching principles, sharing a collective vision that goes beyond the immediate needs and concerns of individuals in their local communities.

This is what religious traditions around the world have done for thousands of years.

Carrying the theme forward, one might say that all religion is fundamentally also local, expressed primarily in the lives of individuals within the social and cultural contexts that their communities provide. Whatever their larger national or international structures, religious institutions are thus woven into the fabric of the daily life of local communities.

This weaving happens formally, in terms of community activities, customs and laws. It also happens informally, in managing expectations and in providing ethical incentives (and disincentives) for certain behaviors.

Communities with adaptable social and cultural institutions (including religious ones) are more likely to be resilient to the catastrophic events that life in a climate-changing world is likely to entail. Similarly, communities with inflexible social and cultural institutions will be less resilient in response to climate events in changing lifestyles.

Whether they are woven into local communities in ways that enhance resilience or resist adaptive change, however, it is certain that religious institutions are part of the life of local communities in many places, particularly in developing countries. This is in part why faith-based organizations need first to be **recognized** for the roles they already play within local communities, as well as their potential for partnership toward enabling the 2030 Agenda.

## Mobilizing FBOs toward a Sustainable Future

Observing that religious institutions are woven within the lives of local communities cuts two ways. FBOs are arguably as complicit in the creation of an unsustainable global culture as they are part of the solutions put forward in the 2030 Agenda. FBOs in particular need to reevaluate their relationships with the political and economic structures that undermine the well-being of local communities and damage local ecosystems.

Around the world, FBOs are actively engaged in the delivery of social services and development assistance, both in emergency situations and in the longer term. In fact, without the efforts of FBOs (whose workers are often volunteers), the disparities between rich and poor everywhere would be greater than they are. Compassion and charity toward those less fortunate or at risk

<sup>2</sup> Arun Agrawal, Catherine McSweeney and Nicolas Perrin. “Local Institutions and Climate Change Adaptation.” *The Social Dimensions of Climate Change/Social Development Notes*. No. 113, July 2008.



in the community is central to the belief systems of all the major religious traditions. There is thus an inherent obligation toward living out one's personal faith in practical terms that could be instrumental in achieving the SDGs by 2030.

There is, however, an urgent need to **mobilize** the human and financial resources of FBOs in new ways. Like other actors involved in the 2030 Agenda, FBOs have to focus on common shared goals, rather than emphasizing their differences in ways that foster division or conflict along social or cultural lines. The recent papal encyclical *Laudato Si* demonstrates how powerful the combination of moral, spiritual and practical leadership can be in shifting the ecological perspectives not only of one religious tradition, but also of the global community.

## Accepting the Role of FBOs

Finally, FBOs need to be **accepted** by governments at all levels for their current and potential contributions toward the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Through working to improve the well-being of individuals where they live, FBOs contribute in substantial ways towards the health and resilience of local communities.

Yet it is unfortunately the case that governments or other actors in sustainable development work do not always trust FBOs. FBOs have to demonstrate their commitment to the same principles of transparency and integrity as any other development organization, focused on enhancing the well-being of those whom they are intending to help. Most importantly, they bring another dimension to the reasons behind such work, emphasizing values beyond those that merely reflect the dynamics of personal and institutional power. They are able to appeal to “the better angels of our nature” in ways that other secular institutions simply cannot.

Secularity is a product of globalization of western industrial culture, resulting from the deliberate separation of the institutions of religion from the institutions of government stemming from the Enlightenment period to the present. This intentional separation of church and state begs the question as to whether religious expression can similarly be separated from other aspects of the lives of individuals. It sidesteps the question of values formation, their origins in tradition, culture or society, and how these values affect the daily ethical choices that individuals make.

To state the strong form of the argument, regardless of the intensity of efforts to separate the institutions of church and state, regardless of official or unofficial efforts to eradicate religion of whatever kind, every community is still to a significant extent shaped by personal or communal religious expression. Whether overtly or covertly, whether coherently or in some more fragmentary way, non-material values derived from religious beliefs mold the ways in which people live together – everywhere, today and into the future.

We need to take advantage of this inevitable interweaving of the religious and the secular within local communities to enhance existing partnerships and to forge new ones. The work of FBOs of all kinds should be considered an intentional and integral part of our collective efforts to meet the goals of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

### About the author

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