

Report from the Steering Committee to the second meeting of the Coalition for the UN Decade at Holy Cross Centre, Melbourne 1 – 3 December 2009.

As the chair of the Steering Committee of the Coalition for the UN Decade initiative, I am privileged to contribute to the reporting back from the work of the Steering Committee since we last met at Maryknoll outside New York in March of this year. My excellent vice-chair John Taylor will contribute with a report from Geneva based activities, while Sr. Joan Kirby – the other very active vice-chair who could not be with us – has contributed the update on work with UN member states in New York that has been integrated in this report, and finally our executive secretary Gerardo Gonzalez will share a summary of his activities on behalf of the Coalition.

Maryknoll / UN New York – March 09

Allow me quickly to revisit our meeting at Maryknoll in which we decided to launch the Coalition for the UN Decade Initiative. You should all have received the minutes from that meeting, and I would welcome observations and comments on them as part of the general discussion of the Steering Committee report.

In short we achieved the following in March:

- Launch of the Coalition for the UN Decade initiative
- Agreement on basic documents for the Coalition: the Proposal for the Decade, terms of engagement with the Coalition, mandate and role of the Steering Committee, election of the Steering Committee (with some unfinished business)
- Elements of a work program for 2009
- Elements for a potential plan of action for a UN Decade
- Awareness raising at the UN through a briefing session, and support from the President of the General Assembly through statements to our Coalition meeting and the UN briefing session.

Developments around the UN: individual member states initiatives (Russia, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Philippines/Pakistan) – UN proper.

In my welcoming address at Maryknoll I outlined some present initiatives by individual member states at the UN. Without repeating this outline, I want to update on some developments.

- Russia has advanced the idea of an advisory “religious council” at UNESCO. The council will be supported by staff positions seconded to the UNESCO secretariat by Russia. The exact mandate and role of the council is not yet known to the Steering Committee. This development seems to indicate that a potential UN Decade may be facilitated and in certain ways led by this new council in ways that are so far not very clear.
- Philippines is still the prime mover of the “Tripartite Forum” which currently have more than 60 “friends” among UN member states. The UN Decade initiative has frequently been on the agenda of “Tripartite Forum” briefings. Philippines, together with Pakistan have continued to lead the process of bringing interreligious dialogue and cooperation to the agenda of the UN General Assembly. I will return to this process later in the report.
- King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia continued his initiative in 2009 by inviting for a consultation in Geneva in August. His ambition of creating a centre for interfaith dialogue, with a secretariat in Vienna, became clearer during this consultation. A small working group is

appointed to work on this idea. We have representatives in our meeting who may inform us more in detail about the latest developments of this initiative.

- Kazakhstan convened the third summit of religious and traditional leaders in Astana in July. Their initiative is not yet recognized as a UN initiative, but is seen in close connection with other initiatives around the UN.
- Turkey and Spain are still the main drivers behind the Alliance of Civilizations. The second annual meeting took place in Istanbul in April. Religious dialogue was less visible on the agenda compared to the previous year, and compared to what had been asked for by interreligious bodies, including my own organization *Religions for Peace*. Planning has started for the next meeting in Brazil, June 2010, and a possible slot for discussing the UN Decade should be brought into the planning process.

The mentioned developments may impact differently on our efforts to launch a UN Decade. The role of UNESCO will probably be different with the new council. The reluctance that we have experienced from the UNESCO secretariat to deal with religious issues may be altered. Further conversations with the Russian delegation at the UN may clarify in what ways a council would potentially get involved in a UN Decade proposal. The Philippines and Pakistan are still promoting the Decade through their annual resolutions related to the “Culture of Peace” agenda. They have been joined by the Comoros and Kazakhstan, but are still the lead countries that negotiate a resolution that keeps language intact about a possible UN Decade. Philippines’ double role as the chair of the Tripartite Forum and drafter of the UN resolution has put the country at the centre of this agenda at the UN.

Work with UN member states in New York and Geneva

Since the Bossey meeting in January 2008 members of the Provisional Steering Committee and later the Steering Committee based in New York have made attempts to seek out UN member states that would be ready to champion the Decade proposal. 19 UN member states have been consulted once or several times by one or more of the New York caucus of the Steering Committee. The list of states visited is available on request. Some of the states responded favourably, but the idea of this particular Decade was new and time was needed for UN missions to digest and appreciate the proposal. A number of states had reservations related to the cost of the Decade, while others could be sympathetic to the idea but not ready to invest political capital in taking a lead. Resistance was particularly encountered by the European Union. While the Philippines and Pakistan have been consistently supportive of interreligious dialogue issues at the UN, they have not pledged to launch a specific draft resolution on the UN Decade. Contacts have been made with India, hoping that country could take a lead. Indian member of the Steering Committee and a prominent Indian religious leaders have approached the Indian government. The response has so far not been forthcoming.

Meanwhile the Tripartite Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace, convened in 2005 as a non-official body relating to the General Assembly, continued to draw increasing number of UN member states, UN agencies and religious NGOs for monthly briefings. The UN Decade proposal has been part of the agenda in a number of these briefings.

While the awareness of the initiative to launch a UN Decade has been raised substantially among UN member states in the last year, the work of the Steering Committee has not resulted in a decisive breakthrough as the following section on the process at the UN General Assembly will show.

Work with UN member states in Geneva: John Taylor will report

Process at the UN General Assembly

The UN resolution A/RES/63/22, adopted in November 2008 asked for a review of initiatives related to interfaith initiatives at the UN, and exploration of the feasibility of a UN Decade. The focal point in the Department of Social and Economic Affairs (DESA) was asked to carry out this task in close collaboration with UNESCO. The DESA focal point sent a note verbal to all UN member states in April, asking for their input. The chair of the Steering Committee wrote a letter to all UN missions with reference to the note verbal, attempting to share arguments for the Decade and suggestions for how the Decade would be different and more action oriented than traditional decades. Based on input from approximately 25 UN members and a research of on-going related initiatives, a report was submitted by the UN Secretary General to the General Assembly 24 August 2009 as document A/64/325:” Interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace”.

The Steering Committee analyzed the report and made some observations, of which the following were the most significant:

- The report acknowledges to potential role of the decade as a broad umbrella that may facilitate coherence of diverse initiatives over an extended period of time.
- The report acknowledges the work of the Coalition, but does not recognize the particular focus on “cooperation” and action orientation that the Coalition is arguing for.
- A call for inclusion of civil society in the future process is highlighted
- Although the report reviewed a broad range of initiatives relevant to the UN, it indicated that UNESCO would be a logical focal point within the UN system – in addition to Alliance of Civilizations and the Tripartite Forum. The call for a system-wide engagement, which the Coalition has called for, was not mentioned.
- A further review process is called for. This may bring about a consensus within the General Assembly, but will obviously postpone the launch of the Decade with one – two years.

As mentioned above, the Philippines and Pakistan – joined by Comoros and Kazakhstan – tabled a draft resolution to the General Assembly in its 64th session: A/64/L.15. Within the broader context of interreligious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation for peace, the draft resolution mentions the UN Decade in its last paragraph:” [The Secretary General should]... at its sixty-fifth session [present] a comprehensive report... in coordination with UNESCO, on the possibility of proclaiming a UN decade for interreligious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation for peace, building on the information contained in the report of the Secretary General and the relevant initiatives to be taken in the course of 2010.”

The Chair of the Steering Committee sent a new letter to all UN missions, again arguing for the UN Decade and drawing attention to the action oriented nature of the Coalition proposal. In conversations with representatives of the Philippine mission members of the Steering Committee were given updates on the negotiations related to the draft resolution that is expected to be tabled in the General Assembly during the first half of December. Their main observation is that time is needed to bring about a consensus around the idea of a UN Decade. A major step has been taken by retaining the possibility of a decade in the resolution, and through the call for participation by civil society in the future process.

The Chair had two additional meetings that may be of interest related to the resolution. In a meeting with representatives from USA (UN mission and State Department in Washington) there was a clear sense of a possible change of position by the US. There is openness to listen to arguments, and to honestly seek clarification of sensitive and potentially difficult issues. To allow a proper process, the representatives indicated that time is needed: don't push too hard! The second meeting was with the current President of the UN General Assembly, H.E. Ali Abdessalam Treki. He expressed full support for the interfaith dialogue and cooperation agenda, and in general terms welcomed the idea of the UN Decade. Although the final text is negotiated among UN member states, a clear awareness and support from the President of the General Assembly is of significant value.

Meetings of the steering committee, main issues and follow-ups

The Steering Committee has had three physical meetings (May, August and December) and one conference call (July). Minutes of these meetings – except the December meeting – are available, but some main observations will be shared.

- The Steering Committee constituted itself with two vice chairs: Sr. Joan Kirby of the Temple of Understanding – based in New York, and John Taylor of IARF- based in Geneva
- Filling the two vacant slots in the Steering Committee: organizations representing indigenous spirituality and Arab Muslim institutions will be invited to join the Coalition. A selection of Steering Committee members will take place among these organizations. So far the Steering Committee has not succeeded in fill the two vacant slots in spite of on-going efforts.
- Criteria for inviting new members to the Coalition have been spelled out. Academic institutions are among the new categories that have been invited to join, and this category is represented in our meeting.
- It is recognized that advocacy initiatives are needed on the level of “capitals” of UN member states to solicit support for the UN Decade. This will hopefully be further discussed in our meeting.
- Attempts to decentralize the work of the Coalition have been discussed and attempted. Further action is needed by this meeting to make this happen.
- An assessment/survey of existing experiences of cooperation between faith-based and value-based organizations and the UN was commissioned. Our executive secretary will report on this work.
- Different strategies and actions to promote the Decade through interaction with UN member states and UN bodies have been discussed and agreed upon.
- Experiences from implementing these strategies have been evaluated, and considerations have been made to adjust them according to accumulated learning. The Steering Committee invites the Coalition meeting to engage in these considerations of future strategic choices.
- Work has started to identify important UN agendas in 2010 in order to link the Coalition to these agendas. Further discussion should be encouraged in this meeting.
- Different ways to mobilize resources for the work of the Coalition have been discussed. A separate section of this report touches upon this.

General observations about the work of the Steering Committee:

- Substantial work has been undertaken on different levels. Heavy focus has been on work in New York, being the political centre of the UN.

- So far there is no General Assembly decision to launch the UN Decade. This was the optimistic hope in March. The UN Decade is, however, in play in the General Assembly. This is a moderate, but important step forward.
- The Coalition has grown moderately since March. A better representation of Muslim and Indigenous organizations is a main challenge remaining specifically for the Steering Committee, but generally for the Coalition

Financial report

Sr. Joan Kirby took on the responsibility as our de-facto treasurer. She has provided us with a detailed financial report. I want to share only highlights:

- During the period February – November 2009, members of the coalition contributed in total USD 25,341 and additional USD 14,000 in November.
- The Maryknoll / New York meeting cost USD 16,544. It should be noted that Maryknoll contributed free accommodation and meeting space, while Temple of Understanding and *Religions for Peace* contributed material and considerable staff time.
- Two Steering Committee meetings in New York cost just above USD 5,000. It should be noted that *Religions for Peace* in addition covered local expenses and contributed in-kind services through staff time and administrative support, and that Temple of Understanding contributed in-kind support through material and staff time.
- Expenses related to Melbourne are estimated to approximately USD 11,000.

Let me add that the Steering Committee was offered the services of the Council of the Parliament of the World's Religions to develop a proposal that could be presented to external funders. The Chair worked with the resource person from the Parliament and developed this proposal, which can be obtained on request. The proposal was submitted to a foundation, but unfortunately unsuccessful. A list of additional and potential foundations to be approached has been drawn up, and when the “dust has settled” after the Parliament, these will be prioritized and approached accordingly. The time horizon of the resource mobilization has been 2009, since the continuation of the work of the Coalition and the Steering Committee initially was expected to come to an end by end of 2009. Resources have carried our work so far, while the short term perspective has prevented a longer term budgeting process for 2010. The current financial status is not satisfactory when looking at needed strategies and activities for the coming year. The Steering Committee has therefore decided to establish a small committee that will, with a short deadline, work out an overall resource mobilization strategy and plan for implementation with timelines, and a budget for 2010. The committee will further consider the appointment of a treasurer.

Work to build and expand the coalition, and our communication efforts, including the website

will be reported by our executive secretary Gerardo Gonzalez.

Final strategic observations

Finally the Steering Committee offers strategic observations on two issues:

How to move the UN process forward? The mentioned strategy of identifying a potential “champion” UN member state has not succeeded. Assumptions that were made when the strategy was agreed upon may not have been realistic. The real politic of the UN is complicated, and work around agenda items for the General Assembly is not done in a context of an “open field”. Patterns and power relations have been created over time, and specific suggestions like the UN Decade may be seen in the context of broader agendas. So far the broader theme has been “interreligious and

intercultural dialogue” under the “Culture of Peace” agenda that is negotiated in the third committee of the General Assembly. The Steering Committee has gradually learned that, for better or worse, certain patterns have been established around this agenda. Certain UN member states have been seen to take the lead, and other states are reluctant to step into this space. The strategy of a wide search for a “champion” state seems therefore not to lead to a desired result. The Steering Committee therefore invites the Coalition members to contribute to a strategic discussion on way forward.

Three scenarios may be offered for the consideration of the Coalition:

- a. The Philippines is leading the process of promoting the interreligious and intercultural agenda at the UN through the latest draft resolution. The resolution has “watered down” language compared to the action oriented language the Coalition would ideally want to see. This is probably due to the need for a text that may be adopted through consensus in the General Assembly.

At UNESCO the situation may be changed through the new consultative council under the auspices of Russia. It is so far uncertain how this may impact a Decade proposal.

The Coalition could more systematically negotiate with the Philippines as the de-facto driver of the relevant agenda. This is in one way a continuation of a less systematic dynamic over the last two years. The Coalition would in this scenario have to live with “less than desired” in terms of specific focus and language, and accept with gratitude the role played by the Philippines – knowing well the complicated real-politic picture at the UN.

- b. The Coalition could put its vision and focus on cooperation and action (a different type of UN Decade) in the forefront and look for alternative avenues for the proposal. One option is to re-focus the proposal for the Second Committee at the UN, dealing with development issues. This committee has a tradition of proposing “years” and “decades”. This option has been informally discussed with the Philippine mission, but with no conclusion. Linked to the change may be a re-naming of the decade, e.g. “UN Decade of Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation for Peace and (Sustainable/Human) Development”.
- c. Certain voices have indicated that we may give up the idea of a Decade altogether and look for other mechanisms to promote interreligious dialogue with the UN. Mention has been made of the “Global Compact” that has brought about a pragmatic cooperation between the corporate world and the UN. Would a similar arrangement be beneficial for the world’s religions?

The Steering Committee offers the following way forward:

1. Maintain and focus on the current vision and mission of the Decade proposal as we interact with UN member states and the UN system
2. Engage in a more systematic dialogue with the Philippines to test out their commitment to a concrete resolution that would launch the Decade. This would include the need to build a stronger and more inclusive group of “friends” around the resolution. Work in pragmatic ways to influence the direction of the Decade according to our action-oriented proposal and with our vision and mission as guiding principles.

3. While pursuing 2., explore the possibilities, potentials, obstacles and limitations of move the discussion to the second committee of the General Assembly with a development focus. Part of the exploration should be to identify relevant plans and activities at the UN in 2010 that could influence the outcome.

The second issue for consideration is about the Coalition itself. If the Coalition is to make an impact in the advocacy period – and beyond – it needs to be more than names on a list. How to mobilize the Coalition meaningfully? The Steering Committee has launched the idea of decentralized initiatives, but the kind of initiatives that may make sense are still to be defined. Our hope is that this challenge will be addressed and given direction during this meeting.

On behalf of the Steering Committee I welcome your comments, observations and suggestions to this report. In particular I welcome suggestions that may use our nine months of achievements and shortcomings as lessons for our way forward as a Coalition!

Stein Villumstad, Chair of the Steering Committee – 2 December 2009