

**CONSULTATION on a proposal for a
DECADE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND
COOPERATION FOR PEACE**

**Welcome speech by Renate Bloem
Immediate Past President of CONGO**

Thank you Chair. And thank you all for being with us here today and over the coming days at this important gathering.

1. As I add my welcome to Dr Kobia's, let me tell you that I feel like somebody who has just arrived at a party which I am supposed to be co-hosting, having done very little in organising it. (Somebody said this to me at the CONGO organized Development Forum last June. So in the inverse sense I know what it is like) So let me at the outset make it clear that the credit for making this meeting happen goes almost entirely to Dr. Gerardo Gonzalez. It is his vision and steady hard work which guided and convinced through previous meetings and consultations on-line and off-line first a core group, than a larger steering group and finally all of us to gather here to explore and give more shape and (maybe) our consensus to a project/proposal which would/could lead to a United Nations Decade on Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace. So, friends, may I request you to give him a big hand.

2. I am here as the immediate Past President of the Conference of NGOs (CONGO), but I also speak in a way now in my personal (Methodist) capacity and as a representative of the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women. When I was first contacted by Gerardo more than a year or even two ago, I could immediately grasp that the relevance of the subject (other than my own personal one) would be gladly taken up by many of our members and our CONGO Committees, in particular by the Committee(s) (we have two in New York and Geneva) on "Spirituality, Values and Global Concern", or the one(s) on "Freedom of Religion and Belief" And indeed, the Geneva Committee(s) became soon very much involved (as some of the meetings were held here) as you can see from your background papers. They became Gerardo's Outreach organ, Partnership Committee, Steering Committee or even Secretariat (don't take everything too literally). My own involvement as CONGO

President remained rather at a distance. My comments here will therefore be brief.

3. Allow me to just brush over two things: first, my observations on the rapid emergence of Faith-based organizations at the UN and, second, how does this connect to our expectations of a proposed UN decade on Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace? What value are we expecting to be added?
4. During the long time from 1948, when CONGO was founded by the first 42 NGOs in Consultative Status, until the late 1990s after the large UN World Conferences, non-governmental Organizations working with and at the UN were known and called NGOs, be they of faith based-, trade unions or of any other (non or) secular origin. What counted was Consultative Status.
5. However, the large UN World Conferences of the 90s attracted many new (social, spiritual, women, gender) movements, networks (national, regional and international) which could not so easily be pressed into the more formally registered NGO framework. It was then that the notion of civil society (organizations) came into UN parlance, a notion which until today has never been exactly defined, other than not being directly governmental (e.g.local authorities are indirectly governmental, but have often been connected to the camp of civil society).
6. It was also during these times that the concepts of culture, civilization and religion entered the UN debate, although many of the world's religions and faiths have more than thousands of years of history. So far the UN had discussed development (there have been already four decades since 1960, disarmament (3 decades) racism (3 decades), eradication of colonization (1 decade), environment (1 decade), indigenous issues (1 decade), women (1 decade), children (and peace, 1 decade) and of course, human rights (also a decade on human rights education). Culture and religion had long been too sensitive for public debate.
7. But then came the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a massive threat and with it many taboos were laid open. And in the course e.g. UNAIDS, reaching out to civil society for help in awareness raising, singled out in particular faith based organizations, both as targets for change as well as most helpful agents for change, as these organizations would have the most direct access to victims and their environment. I noticed that since then invitations from the UN to NGO/civil society often specifically mention faith based organizations.

8. Similarly, (and these are only two examples) the United Nations Millennium Campaign: “End Poverty 2015” closely works with faith groups. Cooperating with us last year in the CONGO Development Forum: Countdown-2015 and in the African Civil Society Forum: “Building UN/NGO Partnerships for Democratic Governance through the MDGs”, they had provided some speakers. I recall one who said emphatically: “Which politician or which other official comes so often and close to the people and tells the MDG message as we do: in churches, mosques or synagogues or other sacred places every week?” But at that time somebody else said (not so loudly): “But you are also part of the problem!”
9. I believe, he stated the obvious. And as we all know, all major religions have been in the past and still are part of the world’s problems. But the huge chance is – and we know this also - that faith inspired people have often been, can and should be part of the solutions.
10. So the idea behind this decade proposal is to generate a movement within civil society to receive and accept the call ...and I quote from the draft: “for an urgent collective and sustained effort aimed at better mobilizing the immense spiritual, human and organizational resources of the religious communities, spiritual traditions, organizations and movements, interfaith organizations and value-based secular groups, in partnership with the United Nations, its member states and other constituencies of the civil society, in the pursuit of a common objective: building a more equitable, friendly and peaceful world. A Decade of Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace, under the auspices of the United Nations, could provide such a global neutral umbrella for achieving that goal through increased partnership at global, regional, national and local levels.”
11. While this may sound rather utopian, I only want to mention that at the close of the year just a week ago some 40.000 young people from all over the world descended into the Geneva area as the ecumenical “Youth of the Taizé movement” and touched Genevoise people (normally rather blazé), religious communities and people on the street alike, as well as media and television people with their genuine quest for spirituality, silence and prayer for peace. While mainly of Christian ecumenical background, many a commentator said: Imagine if they could come from all religions!

12. As mentioned in the draft proposal: Times now maybe/are propitious. The UN itself has adopted quite far reaching resolutions on *inter-religious dialogue*” as well as “*religious and cultural understanding, harmony and cooperation*”, has established initiatives such as the “Alliance of Civilizations”. Other initiatives include the “Tripartite Forum for Interfaith Cooperation for Peace”. In October last year the General Assembly convened its first-ever high-level dialogue on inter-religious and intercultural understanding, which included the informal interactive hearing with civil society, in which some of you participated.
13. So what do we expect from a decade? Definitely not more religious talk or disputes, but rather an advancing realization that our different religions, belief systems and cultural backgrounds are essential to the richness of human experience. That we need them all, to finally recognize and affirm ever more that:” All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” (art. 1 UDHR), that we need them to advance human rights in all corners of the globe.
14. When I mentioned at the beginning all those decades on e.g. development, disarmament and racism, one might ask: what has been achieved: Goals set and never met? It is true that some UN decades are more successful than others. As an example: Both the UN Decade For Women (1976-1985) and the UN Decade for Indigenous Peoples (1995-2004) shared the ambitious goal of eradicating inequalities and promoting greater individual and group rights for their respective marginalized groups through redefining human rights legal frameworks and institutions. The trans-national networks active within these two decades and beyond contend(ed) with similar issues such as collective and individual rights, self-determination, globalization, colonization, and mainstreaming. In addition, these networks have also overlapped, particularly in the area of indigenous women's rights. However, despite shared goals, the outcomes of the two decades have been markedly different. Women's rights are now viewed as human rights (CEDAW 1979, Beijing Platform for Action 1995), whereas the rights of indigenous peoples' –although the declaration has been finally adopted on 13 September last year – are far from being realized. It would be good to study different strategies.
15. The proposed decade will fall into a time when at midpoint -2015 – is the final countdown for the realization of so many UN objectives: the MDGs, the ICT4D (Tunis agenda), the Madrid agenda (for elderly people) etc. I therefore see the proposal for this Interfaith decade not as an end in itself, but rather as an important tool to advance the values enshrined in the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

and therefore for Peace. But for this to happen we need to see a real ground swell of civil society organizations to join and we need to see many young people!

Renate Bloem
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