

FROM DIALOGUE TO *DIAPRAXIS* IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

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- *The Case of the United Nations Strategic Learning Exchanges* •

ABSTRACT

The United Nations Population Fund pioneered peer-to-peer strategic Learning Exchanges in 2010, designed and facilitated by the author. Thus effectively creating the only space in the United Nations where policy and programme officers convened, on an equal footing, with faith-based actors, to assess multi religious dynamics as they interacted with issues of development, peace and security, and human rights. This inter-religious diapraxis, effectively, was catalytic to the normalization of 'engagement' between secular development officials and diplomats, and their religious counterparts in many religiously inspired organizations. The Strategic Learning Exchanges were also conducive to the formation of several programmatic alliances, or partnerships between the UN, governments and Faith-Based NGOs (FBOs). This article reflects on some of the developments and outcomes of this form of diapraxis, while also warning that increasing partnerships notwithstanding, such alliances are not always conducive to the realization of human rights.

KEYWORDS

Inter religious dialogue | *Diapraxis* | Strategic Learning Exchanges | Religion | Gender | Partnerships | Human rights

In 2010, the United Nations hosted what was a unique form of a meeting cum training modality – i.e. a “Strategic Learning Exchange” (SLE), on “Religion and Human Development”. Over 40 participants from within the UN system’s development, humanitarian, and peace and security fields, participated, together with Christian, Muslim and Buddhist development NGOs, and academics with experience in dialogues around faith and development. The Learning Exchange was designed from the very outset to create a level playing field between and among all participants – each of whom were selected according to their experience in working in, and on, development and humanitarian issues – particularly in so far as these intersect with either religious considerations, religious actors, and/or religious civil society NGOs.

The SLE was the first of its kind: offered inside the UN system through a collaboration between several UN entities,¹ simultaneously facilitated and attended by diverse UN staffers, including religious civil society development actors, *as equals*, and provided, then, at no fee. Other firsts included the fact that it was entirely designed and provided not as a training or a top-down lecture format, but rather, as a peer-to-peer learning methodology, designed with an intentionality to offer this annually² as a commitment by the UN system (then) to be more deliberate and learned about religion and about partnering with religious actors.

Part of the reason this was new, is that until today, the preference among many international development actors is to seek knowledge and skills from outside of their own circles – for “the grass is always greener on the other side”, even if these circles know very little about the institution of the UN itself. Indeed, there is a preparedness to pay rather high fees for this outside instruction, even at a time when governments are urging the UN to cut their costs and implement austerity programmes. Still many UN entities prefer to ‘invest’ in expertise hired from the outside – almost always this expertise is based in the western hemisphere and in western institutions.

1 • “The other” to each other

The three-day SLE was structured in such a way as to enact pragmatic, evidence-based and candid discussions, informed by case studies which participants themselves submitted beforehand according to a common template, describing ongoing or planned partnerships between UN and religious entities, in the realm of development, human rights and peace-building work. The SLE was, to all intents and purposes, the first example of an international and intergovernmental entity embarking on increasing its own literacy around religion, and doing so in partnership with its religious civil society partners.

What added to the novelty of this SLE process is what happened within it – and which began to take shape during the three annual iterations of it. The first SLE convened a diverse range of UN entities (each operating in its own realm). The SLE also brought together faith-based NGOs (FBOs) – each of which was an actively engaged

partner of the very same UN entities partaking. During the first SLE, each of the FBO representatives chose to sit on opposite sides of the room, even after they had identified each other as coming from the same milieu: FBOs, headquartered in the west but undertaking the bulk of their work around the world – often in exactly the same countries. By day three, the FBO representatives were much more relaxed with one another and with their UN peers, and even consented to take part in a role play (based on a real life situation) in which they had to serve in each other's shoes (i.e. the UN actor would emulate an FBO, and vice-versa, and a Christian FBO would also play a Muslim leader and vice versa). The role play, it must be said (consistently) resulted in acclaim, rich post-role play reflections, and invariably, even enjoyment.³

Several layers of ice were broken in this SLE. One layer we can brand as 'stereotyped images of one another'. The UN middle managers are trained in an institution which is not a stranger to sacralising the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in which some officials verge on a form of secular fundamentalism in their worldview. To these UN staffers, religious actors are (or were) largely alike: religious leaders often pictured as wearing some form of robe and head cover, forever preaching about righteousness and/or God, and largely anti-human rights – particularly women's rights. To the average UN staffer, even where they had signed official partnership agreements with some of the FBOs (largely because they saw them as an NGO first and foremost), religious leaders were a source of harm to be avoided, at worst, and with limited value-added, at best.

From the faith-based staffers' side, the UN as a whole is an inexplicably complicated behemoth, out of reach of most communities – indeed as far away from grassroots life as possible. When the UN staff were seen by FBOs, they were often seen as elitists with secular mindsets, sometimes even arrogant, at best distant policymakers and/or report sources. Even where they partnered on, say, health or humanitarian relief, the FBO staffer tended to see the UN as the well-dressed men (or women) driving around in UN vehicles, in and out of a given locale, with a great deal of money about them somehow.

In other words, these two constituencies were 'the other' to each other.⁴

2 • Humanization of the other

The SLE experience forced these two already extremely intrinsically diverse constituencies to come together as development and humanitarian practitioners. Full stop. And yet within a safe space which allowed them to reflect on their own self-perceptions, and be challenged by one another. As the facilitator, the best way I can describe the sentiments after three days of frank discussions based on actual programmes and initiatives (shared also in the form of case studies), discussing respective world views and sharing perspectives on religious dynamics and geo-political tensions unfolding around them, is to say that there was a "humanization of the other".

The UN staffers were, at that time, relatively much more used to coming together in several types of meetings and trainings. But for the FBOs, being convened with one another, across their religiously-inspired differences, and then doing so with several representatives of the UN – with each one representing a different UN institution/office – was definitely a novelty. The evaluations showed that each of them highly rated the experience of coming together *itself*, even when and if they differed with the worldviews of each other, or with those of the UN staff (in the latter case, particularly the attachment to human rights as a the end all and be all). “This is the first time I sit with fellow programme managers in the United Nations ...so many different UN offices... working on the same issues as my organisation...a unique opportunity...” is an oft repeated quote from consecutive evaluations.

The FBO representatives also highly rated the opportunity to come together as faith-based NGO actors. “This is the first time I have an opportunity to actually meet and discuss common areas with a [Muslim/Christian/Evangelical/Catholic/Buddhist] NGO counterpart” – was often reiterated. These evaluations continued to be iterated – almost verbatim - for the next four annual SLEs offered. Meanwhile, each year the SLEs expanded to convene NGOs from diverse Christian denominations (e.g. Methodist, Lutheran, Anglican) with religious leaders, and NGOs representing Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Bahais, as well as interfaith ones.

But was it not only the novelty of meeting and seeing and somehow transgressing the divide of otherness. Both the FBOs and the UN representatives were made aware of an important and profound, yet very simple, setting: they were *all practitioners of human development and humanitarian concerns*. For the FBO actors, another realization dawned: although they worked in NGOs which were inspired by different religious traditions, in sharing their stories of their motivations, and their praxis, they were able to appreciate, particularly in comparison to their secular human-rights’ oriented UN counterparts, that they (the FBOs) were inspired by their *faith*.

3 • Gender rights and inter-religious collaboration

You may recall I mentioned that the first SLE, the FBO representatives started by sitting almost diagonally opposite each other. By year two, they were sharing in the various case study discussions that their respective organizations had initiated conversations and tentative outreach to and with one another’s leadership, to assess how they could potentially combine their humanitarian work in the same countries – where they were both serving the same communities, yet each implementing services separately.

This meant that for the first time since their respective inception, the FBOs were talking about expanding their base of operations so that it exceeded serving their own communities of believers (e.g. the Muslim FBOs serving only the Muslims, the Christian

FBOs serving only the Christians), but they were actually consolidating a journey to ensure they continued to serve all communities in a given geographic space (regardless of their religion), *and to do so jointly*. In 2014, when Islamic Relief Worldwide and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) signed their Memorandum of Understanding, the then Director of the LWF Department for World Service, Mr. Eberhard Hitzler, described this critical development thus: “at the heart of our collaboration are the many core values we share such as dignity, justice, compassion and commitment, and our common vision to empower and support vulnerable communities and people affected by disaster, which unite us across our religious differences”.⁵

Another evolving dynamic noticed at subsequent UN convenings – including at the SLEs – was what appeared to be decisions by the respective FBOs to “dig deeper” into their respective faith discourses, in order to describe the specific religious tenets which informed their policy directions, and their subsequent developmental interventions. World Vision and Islamic Relief Worldwide, for instance, each proceeded to document their specific ‘unique’ religious methodologies, or approaches.

World Vision describes its “Channels of Hope” as they way they mobilize “community leaders – especially faith leaders – to respond to core issues affecting their communities – such as HIV and AIDS, maternal and child health, gender equity and gender-based violence, and child protection”. World Vision publications stress that Channels of Hope is “more than just training or education”, it is a methodology based on (re) reading of biblical text, with religious leaders, and doing so in direct reflection on, and with, the very real human afflictions and challenges ordinary people are confronted with. World Vision practitioners convened by the UN, continued to describe how their practitioners at the community level, began to perceive positive shifts in attitudes and behaviours – from declining stigmatization of people living with AIDS to diminishing incidents of gender based violence and child marriage.

Impressed by the approach, Islamic Relief decided to collaborate with World Vision to adapt the Channels of Hope methodology – but using Islamic texts. Moreover, also inspired by what they were seeing other FBOs now undertake around women’s rights issues – and directly using the same terminology crafted and adopted by other FBOs – Islamic Relief, in 2015, developed its first “gender justice” policy. Furthermore, but emboldened by global efforts around the Sustainable Development Goals, Islamic Relief began to steward a “Gender Justice Declaration” – a process they launched with the UN, and at the UN Commission on the Status of Women⁶ in 2018. Far from limiting this to their own organization, Islamic Relief describes the Declaration as a “landmark initiative... developed... in partnership with humanitarian agencies, faith leaders and community organizations who are committed to tackling what is one of the greatest injustices of our time... [by presenting] key faith principles of justice and balance to proactively challenge negative cultural practices and engrained social traditions that are leaving women and girls disadvantaged and vulnerable”.⁷

4 • *Diap Praxis*: interfaith dialogue in action

The above effectively constitute examples of direct and action-oriented outcomes of interreligious collaboration. What makes these of particular interest, is that these are not religious leaders or scholars conversing with one another in religious spaces around text or belief systems. Rather, these are faith-based NGO staff – development practitioners in fact, who are learning from one another’s actual projects and programmes, and sharing their learning in the context of broader multi-stakeholder dialogues. In other words, non-religious actors were/are very much involved in these dialogues.

Even more unique is the fact that these dialogues were facilitated by the United Nations, which, apart from being a secular space with relatively little to no literacy about religions or the massive universes of religious existence, is itself a simultaneous hybrid of peoples, politics, races, culture, ethnicities, institutions, objectives, *modus operandi*, and mandates – among others. The context, the language, and the practices of this form of dialogue, therefore, have little in common with common notions of “interreligious dialogues”.

And yet it was in this hybrid space that such concrete instances of *diap Praxis* – to borrow from the Lutheran understanding of interfaith dialogue in action⁸ – are being catalyzed. When diversities of context, languages and methods inform interreligious dialogues, we can anticipate positive trends relating to gender – as noted earlier. However, we also need to be aware of the fact that the very same spaces and modalities of dialogue are spurning some relatively more conservative positions around women’s rights and gender. Elsewhere I have elaborated on some of these dynamics around sexual and reproductive health and human rights’ issues.⁹ Suffice it here to say that on issues such as sexual identity, sexuality education, contraception and abortion, we have polarizing and competing narratives of interreligious dialogue *and* interreligious collaboration. And it is on thus on the terrain of “religion” that some of the most contentious debates about human existence are being fought, today.

NOTES

1 • Stewarded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and provided in collaboration with UNAIDS and the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC). The first iteration in 2010 was attended by several UN entities including UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, the World Bank, DESA and UN Habitat.

2 • Due to its successful methodology, and the increasing interest in religion within international

development circles, the SLE celebrated its 10th iteration in 2018 with over 80 participants.

3 • The outcome of the real situation the participants were enacting in the role play was not shared beforehand, since the facilitators preferred to see how the actors would behave, and what decisions they would take on their own – this, as a reflection of how much they had absorbed (or changed their

mindsets) during the SLE.

4 • This is not to say that the diverse UN staffers felt at home with one another by virtue of belonging to the same (huge and vastly diverse universe of the United Nations). They too differed significantly amongst one another. But this is the theme of an entirely different paper.

5 • “LWF and Islamic Relief Sign Memorandum of Understanding,” The Lutheran World Federation, August 25, 2014, accessed July 4, 2019, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/lwf-and-islamic-relief-sign-memorandum-understanding>.

6 • “Islamic Relief Announces ‘Islamic Declaration of Gender Justice’ at UN Conference,” March 20, 2018, accessed July 4, 2019, <https://www.islamic-relief.org/islamic-declaration-gender-justice>.

7 • *Ibid.*

8 • “Diapaxis for Peace and Reconciliation,” Lutheran World Information (LWI), 2005, accessed July 4, 2019, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/LWI-200504-EN-low.pdf>.

9 • See Azza Karam “On Faith, Health and Tensions An Overview From an Intergovernmental Perspective,” *Heythrop Journal* 55, no. 6, (2014): 1069-1079.



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