



International Conference on Religions and Sustainable Development Goals.
Vatican City, 7-9 March 2019.

Session : Fulfillment of the SDGs with regard to Prosperity and Peace.

'Synthesis' of the session : challenges and opportunities.

By Raymond Van Ermen

Advisor to EPE President.

Summary.

We need a leap forward of humanity.

Zero poverty, zero hunger by 2030 will never be reached without faiths and their related organizations and an unprecedented mobilization.

Faiths need to walk the talk, be transparent, accountable and report.

An inter-faiths partnership to implement the Agenda 2030 as an orchestra, would be the initiator of this leap forward.

The fields of these partnerships would be finance, education, land and territories, care.

Inter-faiths gatherings at the level of countries or regions should be initiated by young believers.

These initiatives should become 'beacons' of a new era.

We need to innovate *to move towards where we have never been.*

For some the collapse of '*our world*' is engaged.

For others, thanks to the champions of an ecological transition, we are witnessing the '*transformation of our world*' and the start of a new civilization.

Ecological Civilization " is one of the core concepts of Chinese politics today. It is indeed the challenge.

In both scenario's, '*collapse*' or '*transformation*' the question of peace and prosperity is at the core.

The UN Members gave themselves the ambitious agenda of zero poverty, zero hunger, less inequalities by 2030. They will never be reached without faiths and their related organizations !

Religions and their galaxies of institutions, initiatives and actors are key players if we want really to secure that *no one would be left behind*, peace and a good life for all in the planetary boundaries would be managed, recognizing our interdependence.

We had in September 2018, in Buenos Aires, two excellent preparatory meetings to this conference. One on *'inclusive finance for social cohesion'*¹ and the other in the framework of a G20 Interfaith Forum on *Religions and the Agenda 2030*².

Of course our session could not pretend to cover the whole spectrum of related issues. Invited to address challenges and opportunities in view of the next session on partnership, I wish to do two things.

1. **Challenges.** The distinguished panel has addressed several critical issues related to peace and prosperity. I will not repeat what has been so excellently covered. But we could not pretend to have addressed *peace and prosperity* if the issues of economic model, finance and sustainable consumption and production and the triple environmental, financial and digital revolutions would not be addressed. So, I will try to complement the panel debate on those issues.
2. **Opportunities and Partnerships.** I wish to offer some thoughts contributing to the discussion to the plan of action to come out of this conference.

Challenges.

While preparing this contribution, I was impressed by the huge number of declarations, appeals, letters coming from a great diversity of religions and churches addressing the environment, the protection of Mother Earth, the necessity to care.

Challenge 1.

But we should not be naïve. Sharing the same faith, believers are split, as demonstrated by the present context in many parts of the world , with at least three categories :

- Those who are responsible or support the “old world” and are responsible for *'predatory delay'* putting the management of ecological planet boundaries - and the resilience of our societies - at risk. The planetary futurist Alex Steffen defines *'predatory delay'* as “the blocking or slowing of needed change, in order to make money off unsustainable, unjust systems in the meantime”. Predatory delay goes hand in hand with populism in situations where the ecological transition that has been implemented fails to be *'inclusive and just'* .
- those who exploit the injustices of the old world to promote their vision of their *'new world'* as a illiberal and promote the concept that *'the other'* is an enemy, backing the building of walls or forbidding to cross a sea or a channel
- those who are aware of the ecological and social shift and want to create the conditions of a “transformation” of our world for the common good and secure a safe operating space for humanity.

And still all three will refer to the same religious writings.

¹ Third Conference on Value Based Investors and the SDGs :*People and Planet, inclusive finance for social inclusion* . Buenos Aires – September 20-21/2018. Hosted by Banco Nación.

² Ethics and economics. 4th dialogue. Buenos Aires 27-28 September 2018. Hosted by the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Argentina.

Science has the robust evidence of the scope, nature and consequences of the 9 Planet Boundaries stressing the imperative need to act. The growing natural risks as well as growing inequalities and both impact on the whole humanity will encourage large crowds to change and to join the third category, those willing to 'transform our world'.

Challenge 2.

So the challenge of the '*great transformation*', the '*leap forward of humanity*' to which Naomi Klein refers, is to '*change structures, change society and at the same time change ourselves*' (to paraphrase Edgard Morin). It starts with a paradigm shift (from competition and winner-take-all to interdependence, collaboration as part of an orchestra and care in our common home) to which religions and believers should contribute .

We could hope that such new paradigm will be embedded in a 'post-materialism era'. Indeed the more our societies will internalize the discovery of sciences (general relativity, quantic physics and the discovery of our telescopes) the more 'conscience', 'interdependence', 'common home' will become key words. 'Conscience' and 'Interdependence' are very familiar to old religious traditions. A fantastic opportunity !

We have the means of this leap forward of humanity and the Agenda 2030 offers a new paradigm, a new narrative based on principles³, values, rights, and specific targets.

As I have been asked to identify opportunities, we will explore how to initiate this 'leap forward'.

Challenge 3.

One challenge for religions related initiatives is in the field of accountability and progress tracing.

Religious institutions know how , in a digital age, transparency & accountability are key. The 2015 agreements refer not only to universal objectives but as well to targets, deadlines, reporting, monitoring. The action plan should take this into consideration : survey of commitments and existing initiatives, reporting on progress should also be done by faiths related institutions and initiatives .

How to proceed in an innovative way is what needs also to be addressed in the action plan making use of the new tools of the revolution of the digital era in a decentralized world, as blockchain to trace commitments.

³ As noted by Georges Ribières, Comité 21 France : *The great strength of the 2030 Agenda is to base its implementation on principles (respect for international law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, in particular and on values: human dignity, respect, freedom, peace, equality, solidarity, tolerance, responsibility, among others) the new "societal rights", not all codified and emerging, based not only on individual values but on "living together": intergenerational equity, protection common goods, respect for the rights of the population, the promotion of public and private regulations, the inclusivity of the new modes of production and consumption, ... all that, beyond the different conceptions that everyone can have of our society, involves relationships between men. It is this set of values and rights that make up a new "narrative", for a majority around the notions of "common" and "viable world".*

Opportunities. Faiths, the indispensable partners.

The SDGs are a major field for cooperation between religions and, more importantly, their respective believers as this cooperation – if developed at a large scale – would be a major contribution to peace and prosperity.

Build a new path together so that *'no one would be left behind'*, to protect and make humanity more resilient as well as change its financial system, behavior and consumption pattern is what we should be aiming at.

Even more, we need a *"leap forward of humanity"* and an inter-faiths partnership to implement the SDGs would be the 'initiator' of this 'leap forward'. *We know that we must get to where we have never been before. On a new Earth* is a quoting from Naomi Klein book 'No is not enough'. She is advocating in favor of a 'leap forward'.

Such a call for a *'humanity leap'* forward was already the aspiration of Teilhard de Chardin in the middle of the wars of the XXst century. As Naomi Klein stated⁴, *«we know that the gap that separates us from our goals is so dizzying and that the time that is left is so short that small steps would not be enough. In the face of danger we have chosen to come together and make an evolutionary leap»*, inspired by Einstein's vision according to which *«we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking that we used when we had them created»*.

A very big challenge but a big opportunity for humanity ! It is an invitation not only to 'cooperate' between religions at the service of humanity and our common home but to innovate in terms of partnership to have a bigger leverage and a major 'scale effect'.

New forms of empowerment and people's movement.

Pope Francis addressing himself to popular movements in Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Bolivia)⁵ on 9 July 2015 gave, in a way, a roadmap for what I mean by new forms of empowerment and people's movement :

- *Put the economy at the service of peoples*
- *Unite our peoples on the path of peace and justice*
- *Defend Mother Earth.*

Well let's put this in practice in our inter-faiths action plan.

In his 2015 Santa Cruz de la Sierra speech, Pope Francis said *'the future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of peoples and in their ability to organize'*. And that's what the inter-religious plan that will come out of this conference should do.

⁴ No Is Not Enough : Defeating the New Shock Politics. Naomi Klein. Ed Penguin May2018.

⁵ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150709_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html

The revolution of 'on-line' gives the means of the it is a means of implementing 'the power of many'.

Levers of a Leap Forward : Partnerships & System Leadership.

The 'transformation of our world' has many aspects (technological, economical etc).

It requires as well a mindset change :

- (i) recognizing the feminine aptitudes of compassion, collaboration, empathy and creativity, present in women and men, as '*the operating system of twenty-first century progress*',
- (ii) recognizing that our interdependences will lead to develop a new form of leadership that can make the best of these interdependences, organizing ourselves *as-one-brain*, practicing '*system leadership*⁶ and developing new multi-stakeholders and inter-faiths partnerships.

It also needs to be prepared by a survey of existing initiatives in support to the SDGs and report on progress made . To present a survey of these faiths initiatives country by country and to bring it to the attention of the UN, the OECD and the World Bank would be a major contribution to mobilize the crowds of believers and secure the success of Agenda 2030. It is important to show to believers as to public authorities and business that 'the new world is already there' and that the time has come to 'scale up' thanks to a large 'people movement' as encouraged by Pope Francis.

Four Focus Areas.

The action plan might propose to focus on and develop converging efforts and joint initiatives in relation with :

1. **Finance, the first domino.** Churches own 10 % of investment funds⁷

This is the domino that will rock all the others: *change finance*.

The choice of financial instruments throughout history has been influenced by "religious" writings⁸. Now it is critical to walk the talk in this field as well.

Faiths related financial powers (from micro-finance empowerment tools to impact investing, positive impact etc) will also be requested to be *transparent, responsible and accountable* in this field. Would Churches succeed to mobilise the 10% investment funds belonging to them, and the world would dramatically change.

⁶ <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/researchers-promote-systems-leadership-for-achieving-sdgs/>

⁷ according to estimates produced by the Alliance of Religions for Conservation (ARC)

⁸ such as the Old Testament, the Qur'an and Hadith and scholarly explication of the Maqasid (higher objectives) of Shari'ah, and by Calvin,. The encyclicals of Pope John Paul II (*Centesimus Annus*), Benedict XVI (*Caritas in Veritate*) and François (*Laudato si '*) as well as "*Æconomicae and pecuniariae quaestiones*", the appeals by Patriarch Bartholomew I, the Stockholm Declaration co-signed by investors and the Swedish Lutheran Church, are precious references.

The objective of the series of conferences on *'Value Based Investors and the SDG's'*⁹, initiated in 2016 by the European Movement-Italy and my own organization EPE joined since last year by Responsible Finance & Investment (RFI) Foundation, expert in Islamic Finance, is inspired by Cardinal Turkson invitation to seek « *more creative ways to transform financial models and structures and accelerate the transition to a new development model, progressive, modern, and inclusive so that no one would be left behind* » in a safe operating space for humanity.

Our next meeting *'A Financial Spring for People and Planet'* will take place in London and be hosted by UNDP. It will be an opportunity to build a contribution to the inter-faiths partnership action plan we are exploring here.

2. **Land and Territories.** Churches own 8 % of habitable land and 5 % of commercial forests

Churches and related organisations play a major role in rural areas. As owners of habitable lands, commercial forests or micro-finance organisations they have here a key role in particular as regards the rights of indigenous people, sustainable forests, sustainable food systems, including food security and biodiversity.

3. **Care.** Initiatives supporting the poor, the sick, the elderly, handicapped, migrants.

As the Agenda 2030 has for ambition not to leave any one behind, initiatives to take 'care' are a well known major field of action of many religions and churches, their related organisations as well as their believers.

4. **Education.** Churches own 50 % of schools worldwide

It is evident that schools, colleges, universities, business schools, youth movements (as scouts and guides) are key players. What is been taught, how it is been taught or lectured and studied, how it impact the parents and the family as a whole, how business schools are preparing the new 'elite' are topics I don't need to develop.

Youth in the driving seat of inter-faiths partnerships gatherings.

There is a 4th challenge : 10 years left if we want to reach the 2030 goals. We have no time to lose.

We see - with joy - young people changing cultural paradigms. Their understanding of capital and wealth in their lives as well as their responsibilities is changing. Young people are major users of the means of communication and large "migratory". In an aging world, they are the levers for transforming markets, finance and politics.

Young believers should come together country by country, or region by region so that young believers, as part of youth movements, colleges, business schools and universities, could open a dialogue between them and with churches to take the lead.

⁹ 2016 Conference : Sustainable Finance in the light of Laudato si' – Rome
2017 Conference : Sustainable Finance and Care : The Next Frontier - Rome
2018 Conference : People and Planet, inclusive finance for social inclusion – Buenos Aires

They would review the faiths initiatives in place related with the above themes.

They could explore how to join efforts in an innovative way in the four fields of focus proposed above.

They could debate a progress report to be addressed to the UN and Faiths dignitaries.

A Global Platform and Inter-Faiths Partnerships Test Countries/Regions.

The national fora would work together as a 'global network', in order to become the game changers in the financial sector on the basis of SDGs 1 (zero poverty) and 10 (reduced inequalities).

Test countries might be countries already visited or to be visited by Pope Francis and where an inter-religions dialogue is in place.

Such inter-faiths process could also be designed at the level of the Amazon Basin or continents.

Conclusion. Be the beacons of a new era.

While Planetary boundaries turn red and ecological and civilizational collapse threatens, the time has come on one hand to organize resistance, resilience and solidarity / empathy as well as, on the other hand, to shape a new civilization based on our interdependence and a leap forward of our 'conscience'.

Yes, we risk losing the race against time and experiencing a terrible setback in history.

But yes inter-faiths partnerships have the means to initiate a '*leap forward of humanity*' by living an '*ethics of inter-relation*', building bridges, so that '*no one would be left behind*'.

Religions have to walk the talk and should not limit themselves to 'promote' the SDGs.

Believers willing to '*transform our world*' should act accordingly. In particular in the fields of finance, education, land- territories and care.

This 'leap forward' depends to what extent we can contribute to the success of Agenda 2030 as the '*new social contract*' supported by a large people movement.

By shaping inter-faiths partnerships which should become 'building blocks' of peace and empathy we would inaugurate a new era.

If successful, this platform of inter-faiths enhanced partnerships would deserve a Nobel Peace Prize !

Indeed, Inter-faiths partnerships in relation with the SDGs implementation could become '*beacons*' of a new era marked by new alliances and forms of cooperation in particular between religions and believers with the youth as actors of a new civilization, a civilization of love or empathy.

I hope the action plan will shape this '*leap forward of humanity*' by innovating *to move towards where we have never been*.

Annex. Finance ,

In 2016 Cardinal Peter Turkson supported by leaders of other Churches - offered a 'vision' on the basis of which we decided to work on *sustainable finance and care*. As stated in 2016 by the Cardinal referring to *Laudato si'* :

- *Care goes further than "stewardship": good stewards take responsibility and fulfil their obligations in terms of management and accountability. The challenge that we face today is to move from stewardship to care even when dealing with finance. Consciousness of the importance of caring should promote value-based investing.*
- *Making finance responsible for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations: the Agenda 2030 is indeed a clear sign that the international community has come together and affirmed its commitment to eradicate poverty in all its forms and dimensions and to ensure that all children, women and men throughout the world will have the necessary conditions for living in true freedom and dignity.*
- *There is an urgent need for all actors (the business sector, including large public and private financial organizations, as well as civil society) to exercise an effective, practical and constant will. Concrete steps and immediate measures are needed for preserving and improving the natural environment and for putting an end as quickly as possible to the phenomenon of social and economic exclusion, with its disastrous consequences. The rights of the most vulnerable categories must be forcefully defended by working to put an end to exclusion and by protecting the environment. It is of the utmost importance to invest, not only in businesses that reduce fossil fuels emissions, but also in social business that provide education, health and agriculture programmes. Indeed, it is not enough just to prevent the misuse and destruction of the environment; we need to do more to enable real men and women to escape from extreme poverty and allow them to become dignified agents of their own destiny.*

The conclusions of the Third Conference in Buenos Aires 2018 conference state : « *Inclusive finance is a critical innovation to contributes to a leap forward of humanity necessary to face planetary challenges by including those who have previously been marginalized and excluded. Social inclusion contributes to social cohesion. Social cohesion contributes to country performance and resilience which is essential to manage the planetary challenges that humanity faces in our near-term future.* »