

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: A SERIES OF BRIEFING PAPERS ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS. BRIEFING PAPER # 51

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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The right to freedom of religion or belief is linked in important ways to the achievement of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is an integral, if rarely addressed, facet of implementation of SDG 13 on climate change. Attention to those who are subject to discrimination, marginalisation and inequality on the grounds of religion or belief is essential to leaving no one behind in addressing the impacts of climate change. Parliamentarians and religious/belief leaders can play important roles in ensuring this. This paper highlights the relationship between freedom of religion or belief and climate change, identifying key areas of concern, and suggesting concrete actions that parliamentarians and religious/belief leaders can take to address them.

THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF²

The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion – commonly known as the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) – is a human right. It endows all individuals with the right to have, adopt, change or leave a religion or belief; to manifest and practice this religion or belief, alone or in community with others; and to be free from coercion and discrimination on the grounds of their religion or belief. It also protects the right not to have or practice a religion or belief. And it protects the right of parents to raise their children in conformity with their own beliefs.

The right to have, adopt, change or leave a religion or belief can never be limited or restricted. The right to manifest and practice a religion or belief, however, can be limited in certain circumstances, most importantly when religious or belief manifestations or practices violate the rights and freedoms of others. Limitations must always be strictly necessary, proportionate and non-discriminatory in their application.

As such, the legal responsibility to uphold the right to FoRB lies with the State. Non-state actors with power to affect the lives of rights-holders may, however, be said to have a moral responsibility to contribute to the respect, protection and promotion of FoRB and other human rights. This includes e.g. religious/belief leaders, politicians and other non-state actors who hold powerful positions in society or otherwise enjoy strong authority and social influence.³



RIGHTS RELATED TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN THE INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS*

Article 2: Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the present Covenant, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Article 18: Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions

Article 26: All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Article 27: In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.

* For a full overview of human rights standards related to FoRB, see the website of the OHCHR: https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/freedomreligion/pages/standards.aspx



FoRB is a universal right. It is a right of all individuals, regardless of citizenship status and what religion or belief they adhere to, or if they do not adhere to any religion or belief. Religious/belief minorities and indigenous peoples are often vulnerable to FoRB violations, but violations also affect other groups and individuals, in particular converts, atheists, women, sexual orientation and gender identity minorities, refugees, and children.

FoRB entails both collective and individual rights. While due attention should be given to respect the autonomy of religious/belief communities, individuals always have the right to interpret and practice their religion or belief as they want, including to criticise or leave their religion or belief, even when this challenges mainstream orthodoxy of religious/belief authorities.

FoRB is closely intertwined, interrelated and mutually interdependent with other human rights. To enjoy FoRB fully, several other rights must also be protected – and the other way around. FoRB is also related to other human rights in the sense that discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief rarely concerns only restrictions of religious/belief practices and manifestations, but also entails violations of other rights.

ForB is important in the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable **Development Goals.** If we want to improve the lives and prospects of everyone, 'leaving no one behind', we must ensure due attention to those who are subject to discrimination, marginalisation and inequality on the grounds of their religion or belief (or lack thereof).

RIGHT-SIZING FORB

Discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief is not only about FoRB. For instance, if people are being excluded from job markets, discriminated against in the health care system, or persecuted on grounds of their religious or belief identity, a range of other rights are typically also being violated, and the violation of FoRB is not necessarily the most pressing concern for these people. Also, marginalisation, discrimination or oppression of people with a particular religious identity is not necessarily religiously motivated. Even hostility that seem to have a clear religious motivation is rarely *only* religiously motivated. Conflicts are complex and multifaceted, and the role of religion is intertwined with many other factors, including economic, political, cultural, social, and historical ones. It is vital not to underestimate the role of religion in marginalisation, discrimination and persecution, but also not to overestimate its role.⁴



FORB AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Violations of FoRB, along with broader discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, are often particularly serious in situations of crisis, emergency and conflict. Climate change is one of the most serious crises faced by humankind. It will have unprecedented implications on where people can settle, grow food, build cities and rely on functioning ecosystems for the services they provide.

Direct impacts include for example: rising temperatures, an increase in heavy rain, extended drought, thawing permafrost, higher ocean temperatures, rising sea levels and shrinking glaciers. Indirect impacts include economic costs, health risks, loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification, air pollution, and by extension, an increase in hunger and water crises, migration and displacement, as well national, regional and global conflicts.

The need for a global response to these challenges is a key element of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as specified in SDG 13, which calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

RELEVANT SDG 13 TARGETS

- 13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries
- 13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning
- 13.3 Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning

Although the climate crisis leaves no country, community or individual unaffected, it will expose and accentuate existing inequalities and discrimination, disproportionately affecting the world's most vulnerable and marginalised.⁵
Bearing in mind Agenda 2030's overall principles of leaving no one behind and reaching those furthest behind first, action to combat climate change and its impacts thus needs to explicitly and consistently integrate attention to those who are most disadvantaged. This includes – among others – religious or belief minorities and indigenous peoples around the world.



CLIMATE CHANGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The impacts of climate change, and – not least – the responses to them often affect people's human rights, including among others the right to non-discrimination, security, identity, and freedom of religion or belief. While there is no consensus on the degree to which governments can be held accountable for the human rights violations that occur as a result of climate change, there is little doubt that governments can and should be held accountable for the responses they provide to climate change impacts, ensuring that these do not discriminate or violate people's human rights in any way.

Around the world, minorities and indigenous peoples often – although far from always – belong to the poorest and most marginalised segments of the population. Socio-economic inequalities mean that they tend to live in places that are worst hit by disasters and other extreme weather events. The close relationship of some indigenous peoples and minorities with their natural environments also makes them especially sensitive to the effects of climate change. The disadvantaged position of minorities and indigenous peoples not only means that they are more affected by the consequences of climate change; it also affects their possibilities to cope with these consequences, insofar as they often have lower levels of education, less job security and little access to decision-making processes.⁶

Importantly, religious/belief minorities and indigenous peoples are not just passive victims of climate change and its impacts. Being in a disadvantaged position does not mean being without agency. Many are actively fighting marginalisation, inequalities and discrimination in the context of climate change, finding sustainable ways to adapt to changing circumstances, advocating for their rights and engaging in broader climate justice activism.

FAITH FOR EARTH

In 2017, UN Environment (UNEP) launched the Faith for Earth Initiative following a series of initiatives and conventions organised in partnership with faith-based organisations. The goal of Faith for Earth is to strategically engage with faith-based organisations and partner with them to collectively achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and fulfil the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. Faith for Earth seeks to inspire and empower faith organisations and their leaders to advocate for protecting the environment, to green faith-based organisations' investments and assets to support the implementation of SDGs, and to provide them with knowledge and networks to enable their leaders to effectively communicate with decision-makers and the public.⁷



CHALLENGES TO FORB IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

The challenges that religious/belief minorities and indigenous groups face because of climate change and its impacts are myriad and complex. Below are a few examples of the ways in which religious/belief minorities and indigenous peoples experience inequalities, discrimination and marginalisation as a direct or indirect consequence of climate change.

Threats to daily life and way of living: We often think of climate change in terms of dramatic and extreme situations, but for many people the impacts of climate change are felt constantly in their everyday life and routines. Hunger and malnutrition due to scarcity of resources and lack of biodiversity is an obvious example of this, perhaps especially for indigenous peoples, who may find their entire existence threatened by malnutrition and hunger as their surroundings are changing due to climate change.⁸

Climate change impacts in terms of scarcity of resources not only affects physical, social and economic aspects of minority and indigenous groups' everyday life and routines; they may also alter and threaten religious and belief traditions and practices. Among adherents of African traditional religions, for instance, changes in weather and patterns of farming and cultivation have led to changes in the seasons of rituals and festivities.⁹

Disasters: Disasters discriminate in terms of their human rights impact. People experience and are affected by drought, floods, hurricanes, land slides, and other natural disasters in different ways, shaped for example by their location, economic status, level of education and access to information. In many contexts, religious/belief minorities and indigenous peoples live in areas that are particularly prone to disasters; for instance areas that are flood-prone and where lack of access to clean water and sanitation leaves people vulnerable during monsoons.¹⁰

Poverty and economic inequality means that they have fewer possibilities for investing in measures that could assist them in mitigating risks and adapting to new environments. Lower education levels and lack of access to information further contribute to minority groups being disadvantaged in terms of preparing themselves for disasters. Governments may also underprioritise minority or indigenous areas, focusing instead on building infrastructure and introducing strategies for mitigation and adaptation in majority areas.



WOMEN IN DISASTERS

Women in minorities or indigenous groups may face additional challenges in situations of disaster and their aftermath. In fact, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature estimates that women and children are fourteen times more likely to die than men during disasters. This is in part due to societal norms and practices shaping men's and women's opportunities and skills: "Patriarchal restraints decrease a woman's adaptive capacity to climate change, leaving her more susceptible to its impacts and the aftermath of disasters induced or exacerbated by climate change." For instance, girls are less likely to learn to swim than boys; something which can have detrimental consequences in situations of flooding. Similarly, in some contexts, women and girls may be reluctant to leave their house and flee on their own, due to social, cultural or religious norms requiring women and girls to be accompanied by a male relative. 12

Bias and discrimination in humanitarian assistance: Minority and indigenous groups are not only disadvantaged when disasters hit, but also in the aftermath, due to implicit or explicit discrimination in emergency aid practices, structures and reach. They are often last to get emergency relief, for instance because aid workers are not aware of the needs of these communities, because they consciously prioritised other communities, or because dominant local groups take control of aid distribution.¹³

FAITH FOR RIGHTS, COMMITMENT XIV

We pledge to promote, within our respective spheres of influence, the imperative necessity of ensuring respect in all humanitarian assistance activities of the Principles of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programmes, especially that aid is given regardless of the recipients' creed and without adverse distinction of any kind and that aid will not be used to further a particular religious standpoint.¹⁴

Discriminatory aid practices concern not only lack of access, or unequal access, to assistance, but also issues around enforced relocation, sexual and gender-based violence, unsafe or involuntary return or resettlement, and lack of property restitution. Government assistance may be explicitly discriminatory, reflecting broader patterns of state discrimination and oppression of minorities.



This is particularly true in countries that are affected by conflict.¹⁵ International actors may also discriminate implicitly, whether due to lack of awareness; the marginalised position of minorities which may render them less visible to external actors; or due to pressure and control from government and local groups. Some humanitarian actors may also be unwilling to engage with issues related to religion out of fear of violating principles of neutrality.

RELIGION AS A SOURCE OF RESILIENCE, SUPPORT AND EMPOWERMENT

Religious affiliation and identity can be positive factors for minorities in the aftermath of disasters. Whether belonging to a religious/belief minority or majority, people's beliefs and practices can play an important role in terms of strengthening social bonds and sense of community, contributing positively to the ways in which individuals and groups cope with disasters. Local religious/belief leaders, institutions and organisations can be key players in the distribution of emergency aid, organisation of reconstruction efforts and provision of psychosocial support, especially in contexts where government and external intervention is limited. International faith-based NGOs and movements for climate justice also play a crucial role in challenging discriminatory effects of climate change.

Conflicts: Two billion people live in countries that are affected by fragility, conflict and crisis. Natural disasters, resource scarcity, food insecurity, pollution and other destabilising consequences of climate change are expected to contribute to worsening this situation. ¹⁶ In some contexts, climate change consequences may contribute to reviving or exacerbating divides and unresolved tensions along religious lines, leading to religiously-based discrimination and violence.

Government 'preservation efforts' may threaten indigenous ways of living: In some cases, the situation of minorities and – especially – indigenous peoples is exacerbated by top-down government programmes, sometimes supported by international actors, undertaken in the name of 'green' energy and climate change mitigation. Action to combat biodiversity loss and climate change can threaten the livelihoods, heritage and knowledge of indigenous peoples and minorities, if such initiatives are not designed and implemented in close dialogue with the people concerned, ensuring that initiatives do no harm.¹⁷ Unfortunately, this is far from always the case.¹⁸

Migration and displacement: Migration and displacement has close ties to social, cultural and economic factors but research shows that environmental factors play an increasingly important role as well, as also recognised in the preamble to the Paris Agreement. Resource scarcity, disasters, conflicts, government 'preservation' initiatives and other direct and indirect impacts of climate change force people to migrate, whether temporarily or permanently, because their life or livelihood



is under threat. Often those who are forced to migrate are the poor and most disadvantaged, including minorities and indigenous peoples: "Climate change-induced migration is an adaptation strategy to escape a global reality that is inequitably uprooting those who possibly contributed the least to it." 19

UNHCR GUIDANCE ON WORKING WITH MINORITIES AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN FORCED DISPLACEMENT

UNHCR has produced a set of guidelines for working with national, or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous people in forced displacement.²⁰ The Guidelines outline a number of key principles:

- Rely on self-identification: Only define someone as a member of a group once they have done so themselves
- Ensure rights-based protection and inclusive programming
- Support minorities and indigenous people in maintaining their identity
- Consider overlapping discrimination and protection needs
- Ensure physical security
- Ensure disaggregated data collection
- Pay attention to lack of documentation and statelessness
- Be aware of harmful traditional practices

HOW TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES IN THE RELATION BETWEEN FORB AND CLIMATE CHANGE: SIGGESTED ACTIONS FOR RELIGIOUS/BELIEF LEADERS AND PARLIAMENTARIANS

The challenges faced by religious/belief minorities and indigenous peoples in the context of climate change and its impacts are complex and multifaceted, and efforts to ensure more inclusive and non-discriminatory responses to climate change require action from a wide range of actors, in a wide range of areas. Parliamentarians and religious/belief leaders can play an important role in this.

Parliamentarians are responsible for proposing, scrutinising and adopting laws, for approving budgets and mobilising resources; and for monitoring and providing oversight to ensure government accountability and transparency. In all of this, they must represent their constituents, making sure that their perspectives, experiences and needs are taken into consideration and promoting citizen participation. As such, parliamentarians have important roles to play in ensuring non-discriminatory and inclusive climate action. They can:

 encourage systematic inclusion of, and attention to, religious/belief minorities and indigenous peoples and other disadvantaged groups in decisionmaking processes on climate change measures. Given their general political



marginalisation, minorities and indigenous people often have less influence than other groups over local, regional and national decision-making on mitigating and adapting to climate change.²¹ Parliamentarians should recognise and address this lack of inclusion, and work for the meaningful participation of minorities in all relevant processes, ensuring that their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences are heard and taken into account.²²

- work to establish mechanisms to monitor and assess how the consequences of climate change and responses to these affect religious/belief minorities and indigenous peoples. Adequate responses to inequalities and discrimination in the context of climate change and its impacts require accurate knowledge of the situation and mechanisms that can monitor and assess progress and set-backs, e.g. in relation to resilience strengthening, emergency assistance, and other forms of responses to climate change and its impacts.²³ Collection of disaggregated data is particularly important here.²⁴
- support and give voice to organisations and initiatives focused specifically on strengthening rights, resilience and adaptive capacity of religious/belief minorities and indigenous peoples. Religious minorities and indigenous peoples are already engaged in various forms of adaptation and resilience, seeking to reduce the actual and expected effects of climate change the best they can. Such efforts need to be supported and strengthened.
- encourage systematic attention to religious/belief minorities and indigenous
 peoples in education and awareness-raising initiatives on climate change
 mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning. Such efforts
 should systematically integrate attention to the inequalities and discrimination
 that occur in the context of climate change, contributing to broader awareness
 not only of the ways in which climate change impacts different people in
 different ways, but also of the ways in which responses may (inadvertently or
 advertently) maintain or exacerbate existing inequalities and discrimination.

Religious/belief leaders often enjoy popular support, legitimacy and authority. Many have vast networks and relations and have extensive knowledge of the local context in which they work. All this means that they can play a key role in raising awareness of FoRB and discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in action to combat climate change and its impacts. They can:

• raise awareness and build capacities on climate action in local communities.

Care for creation is an essential part of many religions and beliefs, and leaders can encourage interpretations that support climate action. Religious/belief leaders, along with faith-based organisations and institutions, are often engaged in communication and educational activities, whether through their sermons, teaching in educational institutions, or otherwise. This means that they are in a



good position to raise awareness and build capacities on climate action among constituents and in the broader community.

- raise public awareness of the plight of marginalised religious minorities and indigenous peoples. Religious/belief leaders are often, although far from always, influential opinion-makers in society, and they can use their position to encourage decision-makers to ensure attention to religious minorities and indigenous peoples in climate change responses.
- ensure non-discrimination in disaster relief. Around the world, religious/belief actors often play a key role in the provision of humanitarian aid, education and health services during or after disasters. When engaged in such activities, religious/belief leaders should ensure systematic attention to those who are most vulnerable to climate change consequences, including religious/belief minorities and indigenous peoples. 26
- contribute to conflict resolution. In various parts of the world, climate change exacerbates existing conflicts or prompts new ones. Especially in situations where conflicts revolve around religious fault lines, religious/belief leaders can play an important role, exercising their moral authority to promote dialogue, inclusion and peaceful co-existence among communities of believers, at the local, national and even international levels.²⁷

ABOUT THE PAPER

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The information contained in this paper represents the views and opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the views and opinions of any of the above-mentioned entities or persons.



NOTES

- The series include six papers: Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Sustainable Development Goals (paper #1), Freedom of Religion or Belief and Health (#2), Freedom of Religion or Belief and Education (#3), Freedom of Religion or Belief and Women's Rights (#4), Freedom of Religion or Belief and Climate Change (#5), and Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression (#6). All briefs build in part on the author's report *Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief and Gender Equality in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals: Reflections from the 2019 Expert Consultation Process*, Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2020
- 2 See also Marie Juul Petersen and Katherine Marshall, The International Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Sketching the Contours of a Common Framework, Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2019
- 3 Several declarations, resolutions and action plans point to the roles and responsibilities of religious actors as moral duty-bearers, including e.g. the *UN Declaration on Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981), the Rabat Plan of Action on the Prohibition of Advocacy of National, Racial or Religious Hatred that Constitutes Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility or Violence (2012), and the Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes (2017).*
- 4 Marie Juul Petersen and Katherine Marshall, *The International Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief, Danish Institute for Human Rights,* 2019, p. 24
- Minority Rights Group, Climate change further reinforces inequalities and disproportionately affects minorities and indigenous peoples, 2019 (https://minorityrights.org/2019/06/27/climate-change-further-reinforces-inequalities-and-disproportionately-affects-minorities-and-indigenous-peoples-according-to-mrgs-annual-trends-report/).
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- 11 Sara Hayat, Climate Change Affects Women More. What Can States do to Intervene?, Dawn, 2019
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- 13 Rachel Baird, The Impact of Climate Change on Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, Minority Rights Group International, 2008, p. 3
- 14 OHCHR, Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments on 'Faith for Rights', 2017, Commitment XIV. The #Faith4Rights toolkit includes a peer-to-peer learning module on impartiality in humanitarian assistance activities, referring to the Principles of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programmes

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- 16 Faith for Earth, Faith for Earth and Environmental Security, UNEP, 2020, p. 1
- 17 M. Niamir-Fuller, I. Özdemir and J. Brinkman, *Environment, Religion and Culture in the Context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, UNEP, 2016, p. v
- 18 Minority Rights Group International, *Minorities at the frontline of climate change*, 2019
- 19 Sara Hayat, Climate change affects women more. What can states do to intervene?, *Dawn*, 2019.
- 20 UNHCR, Working with National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and Indigenous People in Forced Displacement, 2011
- 21 Rachel Baird, *The Impact of Climate Change on Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, Minority Rights Group International*, 2008, p. 7
- Peter Grant (ed.) *Minority and Indigenous Trends 2019: Focus on Climate Justice,*Minority Rights Group International, 2019, p. 16f
- 23 Peter Grant (ed.) *Minority and Indigenous Trends 2019: Focus on Climate Justice,* Minority Rights Group International, 2019, p. 12
- 24 It is helpful to use the specific indicators proposed recently by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in order to monitor the legislative and institutional frameworks, policies and practices, hierarchies of opportunities and the material realities of rights-holders' lives, paying particular attention to multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination experienced by religious or belief minorities (Ahmed Shaheed, *Interim Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Report to the UN General Assembly, A/75/385, 2020*)
- 25 Faith for Earth, Faith for Earth Perspectives on Climate Change, UNEP, 2020, p. 1
- 26 Monica Mayrhofer, Climate Change, Minorities, Indigenous Peoples and Mobility, in: Peter Grant (ed.) *Minority and Indigenous Trends 2019: Focus on Climate Justice,* Minority Rights Group International, 2019, p. 67
- 27 Faith for Earth, Faith for Earth and Environmental Security, UNEP, 2020, p. 2