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High Atlas Foundation's first interfaith nursery at Imerdal, Ouarzazate. Photo by HAF

Interfaith, Multiculturalism And Sustainable Development – OpEd

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Interfaith activities encourage the interaction, dialogue, and collaboration between people of different religious traditions and beliefs. These activities strengthen understanding and acceptance of religious and cultural differences while recognizing the benefits of working together for peace and healing. Similarly, intercultural collaboration fosters communication and participation between people of different heritage backgrounds.

Both interfaith and intercultural dialogue create spaces for clarifying misconceptions and misunderstandings, promoting mutual understanding, and building cooperative relationships. Ultimately, this leads to more peaceful and collaborative societies.

This article examines the interconnectedness of culture, faith, and development by looking at interfaith and multicultural-based development initiatives worldwide. Highlighting the successes of these projects shows that development projects promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue and collaboration for a sustainable future.

How are culture, faith, and development interconnected?

Interfaith and intercultural dialogue build bridges for establishing peace, social cohesion, and inclusivity in societies by fostering trust-building and mutual understanding. These are essential pillars for advancing sustainable initiatives and development across all communities.

Acknowledging cultural diversity ensures that initiatives are inclusive, relevant to the local context, and that they address *all* society members' needs. Interfaith and intercultural activities pull people together to collaborate on communal goals and engage in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. This can create positive peace, including the absence of both physical

st Masood Azhar and his organisation Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) are once again emerging



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and structural violence. This is important as true development is not possible without peace.

In fact, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are based on the notion that they can only be achieved in a peaceful world. The UN states that 89% of current conflicts occur in places with low intercultural dialogue, thus strengthening intercultural dialogue and placing culture at the center of policies and projects is necessary for fostering peace, collaboration, and sustainable development.

For instance, culture plays a pivotal role in advancing SDG 11 (Inclusive Cities) by preserving people’s cultural heritage, resulting in more inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable human settlements. Interfaith and intercultural activities are essential for this goal as they provide platforms for individuals to build relationships and appreciate each other’s cultural identities, facilitating mutual respect, collaboration, and community empowerment.

Multiculturalism and interfaith approaches are also essential for SDG 17, which highlights the importance of diverse international partnerships for sustainable development. The UN states, “the [SDGs] can only be realized with a strong commitment to global partnership and cooperation to ensure no one is left behind in our journey to development”. Interfaith and intercultural problem solving allows different groups to share their unique resources, ideas, knowledge, and expertise, leading to more innovative and effective solutions.

Case Studies

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative unites different faith and ethnic groups internationally to bring faith-based leadership to global efforts aimed at ending tropical deforestation. Launched at a summit with religious leaders, Indigenous groups, and scientists, this project fosters interfaith dialogue to build consensus on the moral responsibility to protect rainforests. It equips religious leaders with the knowledge to advocate effectively and raise



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awareness within their communities, aiming to influence policies and inspire action.

One of the initiative's major successes occurred at the 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace, where 900 religious leaders from 125 countries backed the Initiative's "Faiths for Forests Declaration", sending a powerful message of the importance of interfaith and cross-cultural collaboration, as well as the shared responsibility among faith communities and Indigenous groups for environmental preservation.

Another successful interfaith initiative is the South Africa Faith and Family Institute (SAFFI), a multi-faith organization combating gender-based violence through religious intervention. Recognizing religious leaders' role in shaping societal attitudes and behaviors, SAFFI provides training sessions, workshops, and campaigns to mobilize leaders to address violence against women. This makes SAFFI a vital partner in achieving SDGs 5 and 10 in South Africa by tackling gender inequalities and violence.

SAFFI has fostered dialogue and cooperation among religious leaders to tackle gender inequalities and eliminate violence against women and girls. Their achievements include mobilizing over 1,500 religious leaders through training sessions and workshops to address this issue, producing educational material, and establishing the Theological Advisory Council on Gender Based Violence. This council brings together religious scholars and leaders from diverse faiths to discuss texts and teachings that promote gender equality and condemn violence, increasing awareness and action on domestic violence within religious communities.

Interfaith and Multiculturalism in Morocco

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The Kingdom of Morocco has long been committed to preserving its diverse backgrounds, faiths, and ethnic groups by promoting the integration of cultural activities into projects for inclusive and sustainable initiatives. In 2008, King Mohammed VI stated that “culture serves as a driving force for development as well as a bridge for dialogue” and that Morocco will continue to preserve its past and present cultures and ethnicities.

The High Atlas Foundation (HAF), a nonprofit organization dedicated to sustainable development in Morocco, works on preserving cultural heritage and facilitating interfaith dialogue and collaboration across the country. One project involves planting organic fruit trees on land lent in kind by the Moroccan Jewish community.

As Moroccan farming communities transition away from less profitable and sustainable crops like barley and corn, they require fruit trees and medicinal plants. To provide the necessary trees and facilitate the transition, farmers need additional land for nurseries. Having identified this challenge while looking for opportunities to facilitate interfaith collaboration and cultural preservation in Morocco, HAF developed an interfaith agricultural project that is now funded by the Moroccan government’s National Initiative for Human Development.

Thus, House of Life program was born in 2012. This project preserves Morocco’s multiculturalism while advancing sustainable development by working with the Moroccan Jewish community, who provide empty land for tree planting next to their cemeteries to local agricultural associations for free. The first House of Life nursery was established in Akrich near Rabbi Raphael Hacoheh’s tomb, in which around 35,000 trees are planted every year. In 2020, the National Initiative for Human Development funded the Merdal nursery on land near the 1,000 year old burial site of Rabbi David-Ou-Moché in Ouarzazate. In the past 3 planting seasons (2021-2024), over 39,000 trees were planted at this nursery, marking a growth for the project.

Interfaith projects like HAF's and others around the world demonstrate the importance of creating opportunities for interfaith and multicultural dialogue. By celebrating cultural diversity, inclusive spaces are created where people from different backgrounds can foster mutual understanding, respect, address shared challenges, exchange ideas, and pursue common goals.

Leveraging cultural resources, engaging religious and community leaders, and fostering partnerships across sectors are crucial for sustainable development. Embracing multiculturalism and interfaith approaches enriches communities and contributes to achieving the United Nations' SDGs by promoting peace, social cohesion, and inclusive development internationally.

Karma Salloum

Karma Salloum is a student at the University of Toronto in the International Development Studies Co-op Program and an intern at the High Atlas Foundation.

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