



## WEBINAR

### **Ahead of the G20: (Re-)Building a Post-Covid Society pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals**

*On Thursday, May 6th, the G20 Interfaith Forum (IF20), together with eleven partner organizations, held the first installment of its "Ahead of the 2021 Italy G20 Summit" webinar series: "(Re-)Building a Post-Covid Society Pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals." Partner organizations included the Fondazione per le scienze religiose (FSCIRE); The Baha'i International Community; The European Evangelical Alliance; The European Platform Against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination; The Fondazione Bruno Kessler; The International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University; The King Hamad Chair for Inter-Faith Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence at the Sapienza University of Rome; The Study Center and Magazine Confronti; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints - European Union & International Affairs Office; The University of Siena; and the World Faith Development Dialogue. Panelists included Prof. W. Cole Durham, G20 Interfaith Association President and Founding Director of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University; Prof. Katherine Marshall, G20 Interfaith Association Vice President and Executive Director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue; and Prof. Alberto Melloni, Secretary of the Fondazione per le scienze religiose (FSCIRE), the G20 Interfaith Forum's Italian host. Prof. Marco Ventura of the Bruno Kessler Foundation and Dr. Pasquale Annicchino at the European University Institute in Florence acted as moderators.*

The event focused on implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in concrete ways to build a better post-COVID world, drawing on the vision of the three G20 Interfaith Forum leaders and their interpretation of the essential roles that both faith and policy will play in pursuing measurable progress. Leading up to the G20 Summit and G20 Interfaith Forum meetings in Italy this fall, this webinar aimed to offer an overarching view of important focuses and necessary action related to religion and the G20 Italian Presidency's three areas of focus: People, Planet, and Prosperity.

Prof. Marco Ventura, who assisted in moderating the discussion, introduced the topic and asked each of the panelists to begin by outlining their vision for how to reach a more just, equitable, and healthy post-COVID society, in the context of the SDGs.

#### **Prof. Katherine Marshall**

Marshall began her comments by outlining the history and underlying purpose of the Sustainable Development Goals that were unanimously approved by the UN General Assembly in 2015. They are sometimes referred to as the "global goals" or the "global agenda". Initially designed to bring discipline (and a focus on results) to the work being done by the UN, most of the 17 goals are pointed at a 2030 deadline. The goals weren't fully on track before the onset of the global pandemic, and they're even more behind now.



In terms of the G20 Interfaith Forum, Marshall outlined two main challenges to be addressed:

1. Though the SDGs are complex, with 17 goals and 169 targets, religion plays a role in each one. The IF20 needs to highlight the relevance and work of its extraordinary networks, which bring together the religions of the world.
2. «We talk about building back better, building back greener, building back fairer, and that is also a goal of the G20 Interfaith Forum—to utilize the SDGs to make this post-COVID world a more accountable, balanced one».

### **Prof. Alberto Melloni**

Melloni focused his comments on the increasing extremism fueled by COVID-19, and the upcoming Italy G20 Interfaith Forum's focus on a «fourth P» in addition to People, Planet and Prosperity: Peace.

«The pandemic has taught us that we are much more vulnerable and incapable of reaction than expected. Some people have used this as an opportunity to increase dialogue and unity, while others have used it as an opportunity to attack and ostracize others. The people in the 'gray zone' between those two extremes is where we need to focus. We need to help them see their future with less pessimism».

### **Prof. W. Cole Durham, Jr.**

Durham spoke of the vast untapped opportunities connected to more fully involving the broad religious sector in re-building efforts:

«Too often in the contemporary world, political leaders and policymakers tend to ignore religion. In terms of our need for relevant, pluralistic voices in the global agenda, religion is absolutely essential. There are areas where, despite the vast difference among religions, there is consensus. And figuring out how to speak on these is extremely important. It's hard to imagine the SDGs optimally achieved without involving religion».

### **Q&A: How does the IF20 fit into this G20 context?**

Prof. Melloni provided context to the first question of the webinar's Q&A session by outlining the G20 Interfaith Forum's current interactions with the Italian G20 Presidency, highlighting religion's ability to be simultaneously separate from and interconnected with all areas within the G20 structure, effectively connecting the people to the policymakers.

Prof. Durham explained the two primary levels that the IF20 operates on:

1. Recommending specific priorities to G20 leaders within established processes, providing an agile and fresh perspective in times of unexpected calamity or crisis;
2. Acting as a "network of networks", bringing together in high-level ways some of the key religious institutions on Earth—and providing tremendous value by forging those connections.



Prof. Marshall brought the conversation full-circle by referencing the specific contributions of religious leaders and communities in the current crisis: Promoting a global ethic that emphasizes caring for the forgotten and vulnerable, helping the G20 move beyond rhetoric to action, and playing an essential role in promoting public health, vaccine acceptance, etc.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Prof. Ventura asked the panelists to offer final remarks on the issue, taking into account a changing world and a constantly evolving international outlook.

Prof. Durham spoke of the IF20's need to continue to find greater opportunities for outreach – through youth, online conversations, new institutional connections, etc.

«We're facing new challenges. We will continue to see civilizational differences. We need to take advantage of institutional pluralism and draw on this plurality to gain a much richer perspective as we craft solutions. And in all of these processes, religion can springboard our progress with a higher vision».

Prof. Marshall referenced the increased movement toward true diversity in the US over the past year, connecting that to the extraordinary diversity of religious communities and the roles they fill. In the context of the G20's «practical paradox» – increased agility and ability to act as a smaller group, but the disadvantage of excluding so many global voices – Marshall said she hopes the IF20 can continue to fill a role in making sure some of the important but often-neglected voices (like those from Africa, indigenous communities, and religious minorities) are heard and that the most vulnerable are never far from sight.