

Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand



Helen Clark

UN Development Programme Administrator

Former Prime Minister of New Zealand

**Speech at the Launch of the Religious Diversity Centre, Grand Hall,
Parliament Buildings, Wellington, New Zealand, 12:00pm, Wednesday
30 March 2016**

I am delighted to be here to launch the Religious Diversity Centre and to support its mission fostering dialogue, honouring the Treaty of Waitangi, and providing policy advice and training on religious diversity.

New Zealand is a highly diverse society. Following the arrival of Māori many centuries ago, other peoples came by sea from the 17th century onwards. Diversity here grew greatly in the late 20th century, and has continued to grow since. Auckland, the major metropolitan centre, may now be more diverse than either London or Sydney. In my 27.5 years as an Auckland MP, I saw diversity in the city increase beyond Māori, Pākehā, and Pasifika peoples to embrace significant Asian and other populations from around the world.

For ongoing peace and harmony, it is vital to embrace diversity, and respect every culture and faith which is part of it. Both strength and unity can be found in diversity. The alternative to embracing diversity is bleak: it would be a future based on intolerance and rejection. New Zealand has an opportunity to make a New Zealand way – based on tolerance and respect for each other – a model for the rest of the world to follow, and it is important to keep on working on that.

Such models of tolerance and respect are badly needed. On so many days now when I see the news headlines, I think how fortunate we are. I see societies ripped apart by violent extremists, with the extremists so often claiming to act in the name of a faith – and yet being prepared to violate every basic principle of that faith. Take:

- the recent Brussels and Paris bombings,
- the bombing of a park near a children's playground in Pakistan on Easter Sunday, and
- the targeting of hotels used by foreigners in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa in recent times.

The list is long and tragic. Our world badly needs voices of reason and tolerance, and those who will work to build dialogue and respect across



Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand

faiths. New Zealand can show the way. In my time as Prime Minister, our government put its weight behind the new Asia-Pacific Dialogue on Inter-Faith Cooperation, acknowledging that the Asia-Pacific is home to all the world's great faiths. In 2007 we hosted the Asia-Pacific Dialogue in Waitangi, and a Declaration on Religious Diversity was issued there. We also convened the world's first regional dialogue for the Alliance of Civilisations – a global initiative led by Spain and Turkey and supported by the United Nations. Now at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), I am able to continue to support such work, and I want to tell you a little about it today.

In the UNDP, we acknowledge the role of faith actors in local communities. They often deliver critical services to people, which enables them to mobilise grassroots support and earn the trust of vulnerable groups. They have the ability to influence cultural norms and social cohesion significantly. What is said at the pulpit on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays matters. UNDP says: "faith matters to people, and therefore matters to development," as promoting inclusive development, tolerance, and diversity is central to our work.

The role of faith-based actors has special significance in parts of the world where governance structures are weak, and where the machinery of the state cannot ensure access to essential services like security, justice, health, and education.

The UNDP has been working with faith leaders for many years. To ensure that the importance of its partnership with faith-based organisations is reflected in UNDP's daily work, its potential benefits are maximised, and potential pitfalls are avoided, UNDP published internal guidelines in 2014 to help our staff advance faith-sensitive development policy and programming.

Any perceived antagonism between development work and religious beliefs and customs is receding, and our organisation is now better equipped to work with faith actors to achieve development gains on the ground.

Other UN organisations work in similar ways to UNDP, including on issues which are highly sensitive and politically charged in some societies, such as women's rights and gender equality; sexual and reproductive health; social protection; security; HIV; and work with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) individuals and communities.

Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand



In 2004, in the Arab States region, UNDP supported the establishment of the region's first interfaith network of religious leaders, reaching 3,000 Muslim and Christian religious leaders - *imams*, *muftis*, patriarchs, and bishops. These leaders, in turn, promoted sensitisation work aimed at their faith communities, encouraging them to combat the stigma attached to HIV and AIDS, and to replace it with solidarity and understanding.

Similar work is ongoing in South East and East Asia. For example, to address stigma and discrimination, and to end harmful practices, UNDP engages in dialogues on LGBTI issues with key stakeholders, including religious organisations, the private sector, law enforcement authorities, and educational institutions. This cross-sectoral approach is what makes the initiative a success, and it was critical to bring faith actors to the table.

At the global level, UNDP made a point of including faith actors early on in discussions on implementation of the new global development framework, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by UN Member States in September 2015.

One of the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 16, promotes peaceful and inclusive societies, inter-cultural understanding, and an ethic of global citizenship. This requires tolerance, and respect for human rights and diversity in the broadest sense. That is vital for building harmonious societies and dealing with some of the root causes of violent extremism.

Let me say a little more about violent extremism, because of the propensity of its perpetrators to invoke the name of religion. It will not be stopped through security policies alone. UNDP believes that the prevention of violent extremism is best pursued through comprehensive, integrated, and long-term development approaches, built on the collaborative efforts of a broad range of partners. We are fully committed to supporting civil society organisations and their representatives – including faith-based actors – as leaders and peace builders, as champions of social cohesion in their communities, and as actors for early warning and re-integration.

A couple of months ago I visited Mali, which continues to suffer serious attacks by violent extremists. It is said that there are too few positive opportunities for youth there – and plenty of negative opportunities. Yet, speaking to youth there, it is clear that they want positive choices – such as in work and civic engagement. Violent extremists feed on what I call the three “I”s: lack of income; ignorance; and perceived injustice. So jobs,



Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand

education, and engagement, are vital. Youth unemployment is a critical issue from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa, and from the Maghreb, across the Arab States region to Afghanistan and beyond.

UNDP works with different parts of the education system, including religious, public, and private schools, and with opinion leaders in communities to advance values of peace. In Pakistan, for example, UNDP is supporting initiatives which provide mentoring for young people by peers and authority figures, including religious leaders, as well as providing viable job opportunities with access to training and credit.

Like the Religious Diversity Centre, UNDP believes that solid data collection, research and analysis will need to be at the core of these efforts. Partnerships with academic institutions, researchers, and think tanks, and also dialogue with faith-based organisations, can greatly advance our understanding of the drivers of violent extremism, and help us devise the most effective ways of tackling it.

In summary, to tackle these challenges, jobs, education, better governance, rule of law, and improving inclusion and tolerance in communities will build more peaceful societies. In this sense, we share many of the objectives which the Religious Diversity Centre has been established to pursue.

With this brief overview, let me now officially launch the Religious Diversity Centre. I wish you and your partners every success in advancing tolerance and mutual respect in New Zealand and beyond.

For more information contact:

Jocelyn Armstrong, Chair

Religious Diversity Centre Trust

religiousdiversitytrust@gmail.com, 027-521-4367

Todd Nachowitz, PhD

Centre Establishment Coordinator, Religious Diversity Centre

Lecturer, Studies in Religion, University of Waikato

toddnach@waikato.ac.nz, 027-432-7590

Postal:

University of Otago House

PO Box 5543

Auckland 1141

New Zealand

Physical:

University of Otago House, Room 4.06

385 Queen Street

Auckland 1010

New Zealand