



ODIHR 2011 HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING, WORKING SESSION 13

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As has been demonstrated in this session, hate crimes, xenophobia and discrimination are often directed towards communities that are defined in religious terms. Religions are at the same time vulnerable to be hijacked by sectarian and extreme forces that contribute to these acts. The vast majority of religious people and interpreters of religious texts and traditions will, however search solutions to the wrongs through constructively exploring the power of the religious spiritual, moral and social assets. The assets prone to be hijacked for violence could and should be mobilized for combating these destructive acts.

Multi-religious dialogue and cooperation is a powerful way to engage religious assets to advance shared security and counter the abuse of religion. The strength arises when diverse religious communities identify values that are widely shared and deeply held and align around common challenges. Multi-religious platforms can provide mechanisms for joint action and as credible and non-sectarian partners for authorities and other stakeholders in society. Multi-religious cooperation is not limited to an internal process between religions, but offer important contributions to the broader public discourse.

The European Council of Religious Leaders - Religions for Peace (ECRL) brings together senior religious leaders from Europe's historical religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam together with Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and Zoroastrians. ECRL is one of five regional Interreligious Councils with the Religions for Peace network. Religions for Peace - accredited to the United Nations - is the world's largest and most representative multi-religious coalition advancing common action for peace since 1970. ECRL deeply appreciates and fully supports ODIHR comprehensive human dimensions programmes. It is my hope that ECRL can find common ground with ODIHR for joint efforts to promote human rights and religious freedom and combat hate crimes, racism, xenophobia and discrimination.

During these meetings, the concerns about hate speech and defamation of religious places have surfaced a number of times. The following initiative may be of common interest for our organisations. In 2009 Religions for Peace through ECRL, Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, One World in Dialogue (EVID) and Search for Common Ground (SFCG) joined in an effort to develop a Universal Code on Holy Sites out of recognition that holy sites are at the centre of many conflicts world-wide. Its overall goal is to provide a mechanism to monitor and protect holy sites, especially during and after conflict, and to promote peace and reconciliation between people from diverse ethnic and religious communities and nationalities. Its implementation is also likely to prevent conflicts from erupting or escalation. The main purpose of this initiative is to safeguard the use by religious adherents of their sacred places world-wide.

After a consultation process with religious leaders and experts from the major world faith traditions, a Universal Code on Holy Sites was finalised in January 2011. The Code has been endorsed by an increasing number of senior religious leaders worldwide. A process of garnering endorsement of the Code by other main stakeholders and relevant authorities is underway. The ultimate aim is that the Code will be the basis for an official convention under a relevant UN body.

The relevance of the Universal Code on Holy Sites will depend on its ability to be successfully applied in local contexts in a manner that contributes to the peaceful protection of holy sites and the rights of their adherents. Accordingly a pilot project is presently being implemented to evaluate the functioning of the Code in Bosnia Herzegovina. The local implementing partner is the Inter-Religious Council of Bosnia Herzegovina. Another pilot project will start in Jerusalem, and other pilot projects are being explored. ECRL would welcome cooperation with ODIHR and OSCE member states in exploring further the introduction and concrete implementation of this Code. The text of the Code and other relevant information will be made available to ODIHR and to any state party that may find this initiative interesting.