

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY



ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS

Seminar on

OIC–AOC Partners in Dialogue among Civilizations

Talking Points

by

Jorge Sampaio

Un High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations

Jeddah,

OIC headquarters

2nd February 2010

Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen

Dear Participants

- I am thrilled to be here today in my capacity as the United Nations' High representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, to pay my first official visit to the Islamic Organization Conference, at the kind invitation of its Secretary General and my dear friend, Professor Ihsanoglu.
- Let me start by paying tribute to Professor Ihsanoglu whom I admire for his vision, his sense of dialogue, and his commitment to peace.
- Since our first meeting in September 2007, we have been developing close and - I dare to add friendly – ties, which facilitate the good cooperation that bind together the OIC and the AoC.
- I am pleased to say that the talks we had this morning opened up new avenues for our collaboration and that you decided to prepare our joint Action Plan implementing the MoU signed last year in Istanbul in order to present it at the Rio Forum of the Alliance next May.

- Now before going into some details regarding our cooperation, let me just explain to those who are not that familiar with the UN' Alliance of Civilizations' what it is all about and how it works
- As you may know, the Alliance of Civilizations emerged out of a conviction that, in order to achieve sustainable peace, long-standing divisions between cultures need to be addressed.
- This vision was articulated by the High-level Group appointed by the UN Secretary-General in 2006 and in its Report, the Group outlined a range of practical initiatives aimed at improving relations between diverse cultures.
- These recommendations – in the areas of youth, education, media and migration – provide the foundations upon which the Alliance developed its work over the past four years.
- The Alliance of Civilizations is supported by a powerful network of over 100 member states and international and regional organizations. This Group of Friends provides the internal dynamic to implement the Alliance of Civilizations objectives at national and regional levels.

- Through Focal Points appointed by governments, National Plans and Regional Strategies for intercultural dialogue are being laid out, providing impetus to projects on the ground, linking innovative initiatives across regions and shaping new policies to involve all communities in pursuit of the common good.

- So the work of the Alliance is, first and foremost, action-driven.

- I firmly believe that the best way to make change in relations between communities worldwide is through concrete and practical projects involving communities at grassroots level.

- Conferences and symposiums have their use, of course. But what really matters is change that occurs on the ground!

- That is why, in my view, intercultural dialogue is not about words, it's about actions. It's about schoolchildren who learn about each other's religion; it's about young people from divided societies who join forces to combat poverty, disease and prejudice; it's about journalists who show both sides of the issue.

- In that sense, intercultural dialogue is a misnomer; what we are focused on is not dialogue, but positive change across cultural divides.

- This is why the Alliance is not only an inter-governmental affair, but, on the contrary, it works as a unique network of partners.
- Why unique? Because it connects youth activists with business leaders; heads of foundations and international organizations with grassroots bodies; human rights advocates with policy-makers; political leaders with civil society; cities with their youth; universities with corporations; religious leaders, academics and experts with journalists and editors.
- This diverse network not only allows exchanges of ideas and insights. It provides the Alliance community with the opportunity to create new projects and come up with innovative solutions to address the complex challenges diverse societies face today.
- This “alliance of partners” enables, for instance, grassroots projects to be connected with foundations that can help them grow and expand; it allows policy-makers to learn about initiatives that can help improve education systems; it provides governments with ideas that will help shape the political agenda and create more tolerant and cohesive societies.
- So, to summarize, the Alliance is a mobilizing force, focused on bridging cultural gaps through concrete, practical actions. As a global matchmaker, it aims at connecting ideas and people to combat prejudice and misunderstanding.

- Actually, the ultimate goal of the Alliance is that peoples engage in a dialogue that delivers change on the ground.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

- Now you may ask: what are the main challenges ahead? Are there reasons to be optimistic or, instead, pessimism and delusion should prevail?
- The Alliance deals with cultural diversity issues – but the point is that, alike with bio-diversity, cultural diversity is under threat.
- Societies as well as the natural environment are in danger unless we take urgent action.
- Did you have heard about the so-called “tragedy of the commons” popularized by an economist, Garrett Hardin, in 1968 ?
- Anyway it is a simple story about a village that only has one field where all the shepherds take their flocks to pasture. However, to increase their income the shepherds keep adding new sheep to their flock and in the long run this produces a situation of overpopulation which in turn causes the pasture to dry up.

- The field here serves as an example of natural resources but it also represents the vast category of “common resources”, also known as common public goods, such as health, education, cultural diversity, justice, security or information.

- As for the tragedy mentioned before, in the end the problem is the inability to safeguard the general interest and preserve the common good – in this case the field – whilst concentrating only on freedom and private interests, that is, the individual decisions of the shepherds.

- What is important here ?

- To draw the attention to the need to develop the “good governance of public goods”. In the case of the Alliance, it means good governance of cultural diversity, a concept that I use to consider central to its action.

- For me it is clear that the increasing diversity of our societies – be it ethnic, linguistic, religious or cultural – is generating growing anxiety among populations, driving communities apart and putting societies and democracies under mounting pressure.

- There are indeed countless cases of cross-fertilization between cultures and religions, as well as success stories of people interacting in mutual respect and harmony.

- But there are also many examples all around the world of our current difficulties in living together.

- And let's be honest: over the past years economic, social, cultural and religious fault-lines that divide our societies have fuelled growing tensions among communities and have encouraged the misguided view that cultures are set on an unavoidable collision course leading to a clash of civilizations.

- So it is no longer possible to ignore that to bridge divides, overcome conflicts and promote better understanding among peoples we need to engage in dialogue. To counter stereotypes and misconceptions that deepen patterns of hostility and mistrust, we need to address the sources of tensions that contribute to driving communities apart.

- First, tensions flare up when individuals or groups feel that their values and identity are under threat.

- We cannot neglect a number of repeated episodes, incidents and symptoms showing an increased sense of insecurity and intolerance – it happens in Europe, but also in Asia, in Africa or in America.

- Tensions also arise when the rights of minorities and their place in society are at stake. Almost all societies in the world are confronted with the challenge of balancing the rights of cultural communities and the need to maintain social cohesion.

- In times of intercultural tensions, it is important not only to uphold the rights of minorities who are often victims of harassment and discrimination. It is also crucial to make the case for migration and remind ourselves of all the benefits it brings to our societies.

- For instance, all findings unanimously show an increasing polarization in the way Westerns and Muslims view each other.

- Moreover, the so-called divide, opposing two fictional monolithic blocs, Islam and the West, fuels further stereotypes and polarization, and gives rise to extremism.

- However, it is important to stress that the vast majority of peoples reject extremism in any society and support respect for religious and cultural diversity. Both Muslims and non-Muslims are concerned by the challenges of security, stability and peace. Millions of Muslim families worry about losing their young to religious and political extremism.

- In order to tackle this problem, new strategies to promote inter-faith dialogue as part of governance cultural diversity, based on universal human rights, should be developed.

- There is an urgent need for a long-term strategic approach on democratic governance of cultural diversity as well as for innovative policies at all levels. We cannot no longer afford to hide the various symptoms of a looming crisis within and among almost all societies that puts at risk the fundamental values and principles of respect for human rights and freedoms, of tolerance and dialogue.

- It goes without saying that political conflicts can only be solved through political negotiations. The long-term resolution of tensions between Muslim and Western societies cannot be achieved as long as some of the egregious sources of hostility are not successfully addressed. But it is equally true that even once sorted out they will not fully solve the deep-seated suspicion and hostility that divide people along cultural and religious lines within communities and societies.

- To achieve its goals and implement them at local level where problems arise and have to be sorted out, the Alliance of Civilizations has called upon its members to develop National Plans and Regional Strategies for Intercultural dialogue covering its four main areas of action, i.e., education, youth, media and migration.

- These National Plans and Regional Strategies are underpinned by a long-term vision and an acute sense of urgency. Urgency because inaction can only aggravate the malaise whereas small changes in circumstances can produce big shifts in behaviour. This is exactly what we need: to generate a mind shift among divided communities.

- We need to raise awareness among policy and decision makers about the need to invest in public policies as they relate to cultural diversity and to intercultural dialogue.

- We need education on human rights. Education on citizenship and respect for others. Education on intercultural understanding and dialogue. Education on media literacy. Education on religions and beliefs and both intra-and inter-religious dialogue. We need to create urban strategies and policies for intercultural dialogue. We need youth policies based on equal opportunities. We need to engage civil society at large, youth, religious leaders and the media.

- These policies should aim at developing intercultural competencies and skills as the core part of a national strategy on life-long learning about how to live together.

- To achieve these goals the partnership between the Alliance and the OIC is of the utmost importance. WE decided today to reinforce our cooperation in to have a dialogue that delivers.

- Many thanks