THIRD GLOBAL FORUM OF THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS, in Rio de Janeiro

BRIDGING CULTURES, BUILDING PEACE

Thematic Session #8, 28 May 2010, 16.30 - 17.45

“Greater cultural understanding can help provide the commitment, focus and cooperation required to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)”

Ban Ki-Moon, UN Secretary General

Background

There is universal support for the Millennium Development Goals, including the reduction of poverty and the achievement of decent employment. For real progress to be made, the MDGs are dependent on the existence of enabling conditions, one of which, as the UN Secretary General has stated, is greater cultural understanding.

Even if a nation can achieve economic growth and create opportunities for education, training and employment, many people will not be able to take advantage because they are marginalised and disadvantaged in some way, for example by race, religion, or any other identity-based difference. Their marginalisation, in turn, is a loss to society and a drag on the economic wellbeing of the whole community. In times of crises, the marginalized also become the most vulnerable.

This panel will look particularly at the obstacle of cultural divisions and how they can be overcome to ensure that all sections of society - regardless of cultural background - play a full part in society and take advantage of economic and employment opportunities to better themselves and their communities.

One of the major challenges in building bridges between cultures, and involving all fully in society, is the inequality of status between different cultural groups. In most multicultural societies, some groups have higher status while others are seen as “unsophisticated,” “backward” or “primitive”. The groups with higher status look down on the lower status groups and see them as an obstacle to progress and a drag on society. We see this in the treatment of immigrants and the disregard for indigenous rights over natural resources in their traditional homeland. It is not surprising that marginalised group in turn reject the dominant cultural values and distance themselves from mainstream society.
In order for meaningful engagement between cultural groups and full involvement in society by all groups, there needs to be parity of esteem, a sense of the value, worth and dignity of all sections of society and a recognition of the contribution each can make to the whole. Dialogue between cultures has an important part to play in building respect and mutual understanding, but too often it can be a patronising exercise in which the dominant groups show that they care and the disadvantaged groups are encouraged to understand and adapt to the dominant culture. Such dialogue must take place in a context where the perspectives and world views of all participants are of equal weight and must be taken into account in future decision making.

How is that to be achieved? The Club de Madrid, through its Shared Societies Project, has developed a vision of what a genuinely shared society would look like, where all residents can feel at home and able to express their own identity and feel free to be different. It has also identified ten areas of public life and governance, called the Ten Commitments, because they must all be addressed if this is to be achieved. They include creating educational and economic opportunities and legal protection, but they also include the need to develop a shared multicultural vision for the future of the society, initiatives to promote respect and appreciation of diversity, mechanisms to monitor policies to ensure that they do not disadvantage some sections of the society and opportunities that allow marginalised groups to be consulted about the needs and the effectiveness of state and community structures in meeting those needs. Consultation is important to ensure that the views of the marginalised groups cannot be ignored.

The Alliance of Civilizations, the Club of Madrid and the Oslo Center recognise the challenge some leaders face in acknowledging the urgency of tackling social, religious and cultural divisions as part of a larger socio-economic agenda.

Participants in this session will share good examples of ongoing initiatives aimed at creating jobs and reducing poverty and will discuss how to enhance international cooperation in this field by sharing best practices and sponsoring common projects. In this Thematic Session the speakers will share their experiences and the experiences of their countries in facing the challenge of ensuring that all cultural groups are respected and able to play a full part in the social and economic life of the community, thereby contributing to the well-being of all and the reduction of poverty.

Organizing partners

Club of Madrid and Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights.