

## HOW TO SCALE UP EU SUPPORT TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

### *PRESENTATION OF THE WORK AND OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SPECIAL ENVOY FOR THE PROMOTION OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF OUTSIDE THE EU, JAN FIGEL.*

#### Meeting Notes

##### **About the meeting**

The meeting was organized by Jan Figel in cooperation with the Directorate General on International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO). Jan Figel is the EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion and Belief appointed in 2016 and had for the last 3 years visited 16 Countries meeting different stakeholders including government officers, civil society organizations and faith actors in different contexts to discuss the state of FoRB in their societies.

In this meeting, he was sharing his findings and recommendations with the EU Member States, partner countries, Members of the European Parliament, representatives of intergovernmental organizations and civil society organizations. The participants then engaged in discussions on how to best bring forward the FoRB agenda.

##### **Meeting's Deliberations**

Jan Figel presented his work to the plenary in the afternoon of the first day. In his presentation, he highlighted 4 recommendations which the discussions of the meeting henceforth focused on.

1. **Boosting FoRB literacy** – This is about increasing capacities of various EU delegations, security agencies, governments, faith actors and communities on FoRB.
2. **FoRB & SDGs** – The discussions were on how to promote FoRB while addressing the other SDGs especially SDGs 1 on ending poverty, 5 on gender equality, 16 on promoting peace and possibility of promoting FoRB also with SDG 3 and 4 on Health and Education. This discussion at the end of the 2 days had crystallized to **Life Dialogue** which is dialogue through joint community initiatives.
3. **Inter-religious engagement** – Jan Figel recommends that the EU and MS should encourage and support cooperation between human rights and religious actors and support interreligious dialogue and collaboration as a policy tool to combat intolerance and discrimination and advance FoRB. The participants agreed that collaborations among these different “spheres” of human rights, religions and policy-making should be encouraged.
4. **Implementing FoRB within a human rights framework** – He recommends to the EU and MS to continue to anchor their support of FoRB within a broader human rights framework based on principles of universality, nondiscrimination and indivisibility. He also pointed out that the intersection between FoRB and citizenship is key.

##### **Initiatives of EU Member States and other FoRB actors**

Figel's presentation received very positive reactions from member states represented by officials from departments of religious affairs or freedom of religion and belief in their respective Countries. There were 8 member states (Germany, France, Hungary, Finland, Poland, Denmark, Lithuania and Netherlands) represented. Other Civil society organizations and academia also reacted to the report from different angles. Some of the initiatives I noted were:

**Hungary** – Has a program called Aid of Persecuted Christians and the Hungary Helps.

**OHCHR** – Faith for Rights Framework

**Search for Common Ground** – Inter-religious Engagement (They are already engaged in Nigeria)

**International Centre on Law and Religion Studies** – Role of Human Dignity in Adjudication

- Religious perspectives on human dignity
- Journey from persecution to inclusion

**MS Embassies** – Other member states were also supporting FoRB through their own funding instruments like we know that the Dutch Embassy has been supporting the Diocese of Egypt in their quite successful **Together We Develop Egypt** project.

#### **Other EU supported projects on FoRB**

We had opportunity to present on our different projects promoting FoRB to the meeting participants. The presentations focused on the achievements and the challenges encountered or foreseen. In Africa, besides CRID, there is a project being implemented by CAFOD in Nigeria and Niger dubbed “Action for Cultural and Religious pluralism”. In the Middle East, there are 2 projects. One is called Hiwarouna focusing on Interfaith and Intercultural dialogue in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon being implemented by Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD). The other is being implemented by Mennonite Central Committee and is promoting religious tolerance and mutual understanding within and between faiths in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq.

There are other 4 projects in Asia:

i) Southeast Asia: Advancing Inter-Religious dialogue and FoRB (SEA-AIR) being implemented by Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers; ii) Upholding Rights of Minorities beyond Borders in South Asia, implemented by International Movement Against all Form of Discrimination and Racism; iii) Support for defenders of cultural and religious pluralism; and iv) Supporting Religious Pluralism and Respect for FoRB across South Asia implemented by Minority Rights Group.

#### **Observations and Conclusion**

- i) EU Commission and MS are very keen on promoting FoRB and there were several proposals to have FoRB as a funding instrument.
- ii) There is strong desire to promote FoRB within a broader HR framework and closely integrated with SDGs. Life dialogue is a preferred strategy.
- iii) The EU commission is much interested in the impact our projects are creating in the communities. The meeting used several individual testimonies of people who benefitted from interventions of FoRB promoters e.g. the Pakistani persecuted Christian Woman **Asia Bibi** who was released after interventions.
- iv) There is a huge opportunity for scale up of our interventions once we prove impact as EU is likely to increase its support to FoRB.
- v) Nigeria is a Country of concern and had a lot of reference in the meeting. I think the Fulani migration that has had some angle of inter-religious conflict in West Africa could be the reason of the hyped interest.
- vi) CRID presentation was highly appreciated and there was a proposal to have an annual event for sharing of project learnings convened by the EU.

**Thank you**