



Interreligious Association for Peace and Development

in partnership with:



Universal Peace Federation



World Council of Churches



WOMEN'S FEDERATION FOR WORLD PEACE INTERNATIONAL



International Association of Youth and Students for Peace



FONDATION ADLANIA



Gurdwara Sahib Geneva Sikh Temple

Fribourg Peace Forum

GiiA

Geneva Interfaith Intercultural Alliance

“Empowering Youth for Peace through Interreligious Cooperation, Education and Humanitarian Action.”

“Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD) meeting on the international Day of Peace”

Geneva, Switzerland, September 21 & 22, 2020

The Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD) in Europe and Middle East, a project of the Universal Peace Federation with key partners, took the initiative to host a two-day conference: “**Empowering Youth for Peace through interreligious cooperation, education and humanitarian action.**” It featured an Interfaith Learning Workshop webinar on September 21, 2020, commemorating the 39th International Day of Peace, with the cooperation of 6 faith communities in Geneva, and a Webinar with 2 distinct sessions on September 22, 2020.

Co-chaired by **Heiner Handschin & Carolyn Handschin**, head of IAPD Europe and Middle East, and President of WFWP Europe respectively, the program of September 21, 2020 consisted of a live roundtable of faith leaders addressing the topic of educating youth for peace from the perspective of their religious traditions. Unable to travel to Geneva, Cheikh Khaled Bentounès joined virtually. The faith leaders expressed their views and conveyed a model of interfaith harmony, showing the example of religious leaders of all faiths developing a deep sense of appreciation towards each other and cooperating for the sake of peace. The panel was followed by an extended discussion and live interaction with youth representatives of different backgrounds, attending the round table through zoom. Several hundred participants followed the debate on zoom and a selected group of youth delegates were enabled to address the panelists with questions and comments. There was a keen interest from both sides to interact and the whole round table and webinar developed into a lively debate.



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c/o UPF - Rue Anne-Torcapel 10 – 1202 Geneva

Ch. de la Pierreire 1D, 1092 Belmont

switzerland.upf.org,

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The faith communities and their representatives:

Lutheran Protestantism, World Council of Churches (WCC): **Rev. Dr. Simone Sinn**, Professor at College Bossey and Ecumenical Institute of the WCC.

Catholic Parish of Geneva, Basilique Notre Dame: **Mgr. Pierre Farine, Bishop (em.)**

Confrérie Soufie Alawiyya : **Cheikh Khaled Bentounes**

Fondation Culturelle Islamique (Grand Mosque) Geneva: **Mohamed Levrak**, Deputy Director

Fondation de l'Entre-Connaissance: **M. Hafid Ouadiri, Director**

Liberal Jewish Community of Geneva, GIL: **Rabbi François Garai**

Sikh Gurudwara: **Bachittar Ughra Sing**



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Through the cooperation with the Geneva Spiritual Appeal and with the endorsement of the Rev. Dr. William A. McComish, Dean emeritus of the St. Peter's Cathedral of Geneva, this gathering came about in partnership with the World Council of Churches (WCC) whose current General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Ioan Sauca mandated Rev. Dr. Simone Sinn, a Lutheran Professor of Ecumenical Theology at the WCC's College Bogis-Bossey, near Geneva, to take part in the round table. The Rev. McComish was unable to participate because of being hospitalized just a few days before the conference.

After opening remarks by the organizers, **Rabbi François Garaï** as President of the Geneva Spiritual Appeal described briefly the unique spirit of Geneva, welcoming people of different faiths, creeds or cultures. He compared the spirit of Geneva with an umbrella that embraces the large variety of people living in this quite small place. Through the tragedy of the crash of the flight Swissair 111 in 1999, many people lost friends and family in the Geneva community. Because of this fact, the wider community of Geneva, under the leadership of the faith leaders, decided to come together to overcome the differences and unite in mourning, but also to rise above the differences and create a climate of deep dialogue and friendship among the various faiths. The faith leaders created a Charter emphasizing that religions should never be misused for political purposes or to discriminate against others. This step created a sort of "camaraderie" among the different faith communities and a bond of trust and cooperation was established.

Bishop Pierre Farine of the Roman Catholic Church of Geneva, defined the meaning of peace not just as a quiet river in a beautiful landscape, but rather as a state of mind that needs to be built through a conscious effort. The peaceful co-existence of people of different worldviews and faiths must likewise be built patiently and consistently. For Bishop Farine, the same challenge is met by the small child that is reconciling with his little friend in the playing ground and the world leader who negotiates peace with other world leaders. "We have this point in common, that we are all in need to be educated for peace and we are at the same time all educators for peace. We are responsible for any peaceful outcome and shouldn't wait for others to do it."

Rev. Dr. Simone Sinn of the World Council of Churches (WCC) focused on the topic of empowerment of youth for peace. The UN resolution on Peace and Security focused on youth as agents of peace. They are, as she called them, "pathfinders for peace". We underestimate their potential for peace. We often consider youth to be trouble-makers, because they can be angry because of social injustices and the destruction of the environment. Youth can very easily create new networks and have the ability to go beyond institutions. She stated: "We don't need to get rid of institutions but we need to go beyond institutions". She emphasized three pillars regarding youth empowerment, the first being to include youth participation in all government structures and activities. A second point is a need for the best possible education for youth, including interreligious education. "Sometimes, we think we have to protect them from getting in touch with others. This is wrong". From her experience as a professor, she emphasized that the sense of urgency that young people feel can be a driving force for policy change and can highlight new priorities. In a media driven age there is a need to embrace otherness. Diversity should be embraced. She closed her presentation with a call for an intergenerational approach and an intercultural effort to bring about change.

Mr. Hafid Ouardiri, former spokesperson of the Grand Mosque in Geneva and President of the "Fondation de L'Entre-connaissance", explained that he was told by his grand-father at a very young age that peace was an important pre-condition for human development. When he moved to France as a student, he realized very sadly that he was different from others and lived a difficult reality of being part of an ill loved minority. At the same time, he understood that peace and social justice cannot be separated from each other. He was also confronted with a society that judged one another based on possessions, origins, ethnicity and religion. Moving to Geneva let him discover different horizons and an open mind demonstrated by the spirit of togetherness of Geneva. He closed his presentation by emphasizing the need for all of us to be involved in improving the society we live in, beyond differences in faith and creed and help young people by working with them and taking their concerns and issues more seriously.

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As the next speaker of the roundtable, the Deputy Director of the Islamic Cultural Foundation and the Grand Mosque of Geneva, **Mr. Mohamed Levvak**, addressed especially the youth of Switzerland, Europe and the world. He stated that unfortunately there is a widespread misunderstanding about the precious value of Islam and faith in general and that we are living in a world where the religions of others are sometimes demonized. He thanked IAPD for this meeting and emphasized the strong commitment of the Islamic Community of Geneva to embrace diversity and a multicultural and multifaith society.

As a special surprise, the next speaker, **Sheikh Khaled Bentounès**, spiritual leader of the “Confrérie Soufie Alawiyya” with more than 100,000 followers throughout the world, joined us on zoom from Southern France. Sheikh Bentounès thanked the organizers for the invitation to the roundtable and welcomed the topic of “empowerment of youth for peace”. He stated that peace is not just an absence of war but a state of mind, an energy that can become contagious. A peaceful person is a person that is prosperous because he rallies people around him with the same state of mind. Peace within myself is important at first, followed by an effort for peace with others and finally also with our environment. Our earthly environment takes care of all our needs and therefore we must also care for our environment. We need to transform our way of dealing with all things of the world and should transfer this knowledge to our young people especially. The Sheikh said that his movement especially associated with organizations like the Scouts movement in order to promote a constructive and positive culture of peace. He expressed that he hoped for a cooperation with Geneva through the Geneva Spiritual Appeal, IAPD and other likeminded associations. He stated that he sees Geneva as a place of nourishment for a culture of peace. He expressed his strong desire to cooperate and to contribute with the partners present.

The last contributor from the various faith communities was Mr. **Bachittar Ughra Singh**, Co-founder and Vice-President of the Sikh Gurudwara Temple of Geneva. Mr. Singh stated at the outset that Sikhism is a minority faith here in Geneva and expressed his gratitude to be able to join this gathering. He stressed that his religion places great emphasis on respect for women and the need to respect diversity as well as the human rights of all. Youth need to be taught these values of spirituality, generosity and hospitality towards others.

The roundtable participants agreed that we owe it to the future leaders of society to be able to build on all the good foundations established and allow them to improve the situation where it is needed in order to build a peaceful and just society and world in the years and decades to come. The faith leaders addressed very carefully the topic of youth empowerment, emphasizing that especially religious leaders have to focus more strongly on youth, by offering support in a time when so many difficult influences are leaving young people disenfranchised and without the necessary means to cope with the contemporary reality.

The questions raised by the 6 youth delegates with the wise leadership of the young Rabbi Kevin De-Carli, representing hundreds of youth connected through Zoom and Facebook live streaming, showed the keen interest of young people in religion and spirituality but also some scepticism about institutionalized religion that seems too often narrowminded and blinded by self-interest. The faith leaders of the round table responded very eloquently, echoing many good points of the youth delegates and showing a deep understanding of the youth delegates’ constructive criticism. The session, which was followed by several hundred participants through Zoom, Facebook and YouTube, ended after a lively interaction of 90 minutes with short statements from each of the faith leaders giving rise to hope for a continuation of this kind of intergenerational conference in the very near future. IAPD Europe and Middle East would like to thank all the partners involved for the fruitful cooperation which made such an impressive meeting possible; indeed, the door is now open to greater youth empowerment with the active participation of Geneva’s faith communities.

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September 22, 2020

11:00 Opening Session

Welcoming remarks, **Mr. Jacques Marion**, President, UPF Europe & Middle East

Dr. Katsumi Otsuka, Chairperson UPF Europe & Middle East

Rev. Dr. Ioan Sauca, Acting General Secretary the World Council of Churches (WCC)



The second day of the conference, September 22, 2020, started with an opening session and welcoming remarks by **Mr. Jacques Marion**, President of UPF Europe and the Middle East, who spoke about the role of Geneva as a well-known microcosm of the world, with the presence of the UN and many international organizations, but also well-known historically as a city of refuge. He stressed the power of altruistic love as means to solve conflicts is a message that especially resonates with youth who have the idealism needed and the potential to contribute to a better world.

He then introduced the **Rev. Dr. Ioan Sauca**, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), who described this conference as very timely. Despite the pain and panic at the time of pandemic, he said that we need a hopeful message and to come together to build a peaceful world. “Shalom”, as the WCC word their peace efforts, implies more than solving a conflict, but it means a restorative and more holistic approach in which everyone, all people of faith realize their interconnectedness to serve and heal the suffering world. One of the biggest challenges is the underrepresentation of youth and the underuse of young people’s potential. He emphasized that it is high time for faith communities to engage in bringing in youth to peace efforts, because their energy and idealism can be very instrumental to the realization of lasting peace in the world. He ended with an encouragement for more intergenerational cooperation.

Finally, **Dr. Katsumi Otsuka**, chairman of UPF Europe and the Middle East. offered his welcoming remarks for the event by encouraging lasting partnership among key stakeholders and promised that UPF will be support this kind of effort. He stressed that interdenominational and international cooperation is needed in this time of the Pandemic of COVID 19. Young people’s active participation and energy will certainly be very instrumental to bring about change in the current world.

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For the next panel, Mr. Marion introduced **Carolyn Handschin**, Director WFWPI Offices for UN Relations, to moderate the discussion on the **role and importance of youth in society**. The session was to look at means of creating a stable culture of peace through education and the integration of youth in every facet of society: religion, culture, politics, economy, development, policy- and decision making. The following speakers contributed from their different perspectives.

Sheikh Nuru Mohammed, Shia-Islamic leader, Ghana & UK

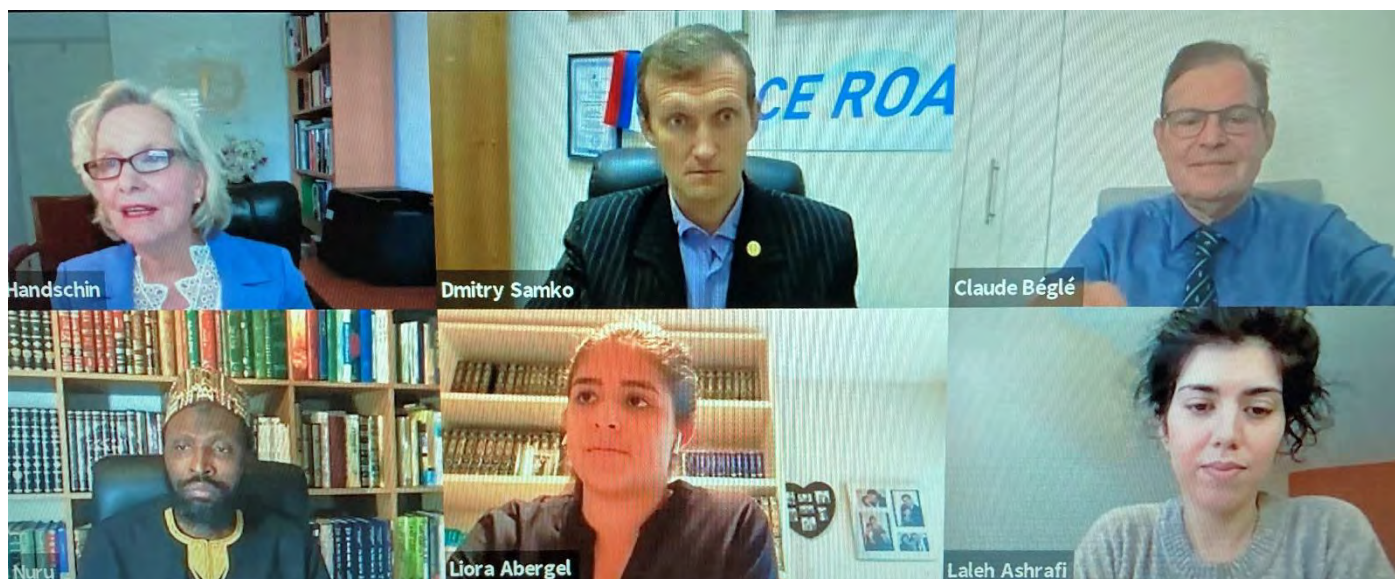
Dr. Claude Béglé, CEO of SymbioSwiss Sàrl, Member of National Parliament (2015-2019), Switzerland

Ms. Liora Abergel, Likrat Project, Jewish community of Switzerland

Ms. Laleh Ashrafi, UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Geneva

Mr. Dmitry Samko, head of UPF in Moscow, Russia

The presentations were followed by an interactive Q&A session.



Carolyn Handschin opened the session by giving a short overview of the previous day's event and putting into context the upcoming webinar. She stated that based on the meeting of September 21, and the very lively interaction between the Geneva Faith leaders and the youth representatives, "we are encouraged and hopeful that things can become very constructive and promising when there is intergenerational cooperation."

She introduced the session and debate around the role of youth in society and what could be the benefits of youth empowerment. To answer this question, the factors to be considered were perspectives from government, religion, international organizations and various representatives of civil society.

Sheikh Nuru Mohamed addressed the role of youth in today's society. He began his talk by describing the three stages in human life: childhood, youth and old age. Middle age and old age are matched together. He characterized the youth stage as the most sensitive stage in human life. Why? Because it is in the period of youth when people are either being led to positivity or negativity depending on the handling of youth.

What are the characteristics of youth? There are so many discussions about the period of youth. The UN has its own definition of youth, as have many other groups and stakeholders. The period of youth can be defined as from the age of 13-14 up to 40 years old. This is the age of productivity. The importance of youth in our current society can be seen in terms of creativity and productivity. Additionally, youth are rather quick in decision making, with no hesitation.

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We need quick decision makers. Give them opportunities. Another quality of youth is the ability to adapt quickly to changes. Islam mentions that the heart of youth is like fertile soil: whenever you plant something, it will grow quickly. Youth can move mountains, when given the opportunity to do so. He stressed that we as elders shouldn't judge from our perspectives because the current time is different from "our day".

The second speaker of the panel, **Dr. Claude Béglé**, a renowned CEO of large international corporations and experienced politician from Switzerland, stressed the need for youth to be given perspectives, economically, socially and also to be given aspirations. Aspirations can be positive but also can be negative. Youth per definition can be mobilized for ideals; there is malleability but there is a certain fragility at the same time. The Green movement is something like a new religion. Dr. Béglé reported from his wide range of experience as a peace negotiator in his former mission as a diplomat in the Swiss foreign services, which made him understand that education was often missing when youth went astray and fell into traps of radicalisation and violence. Youth without perspectives can more easily be manipulated, due to a lack of sense of purpose in life. Many young people would most importantly need an input of positive core values that can take them out of this perspective. He closed his talk by calling more than anything else, for a need of a sense of purpose and a respect for others and their perspectives. He also emphasized the understanding to provide common ideals. Dialogue between the different religions and coming together of the different faiths is necessary, not just theologically but by tackling common issues and working together heart to heart.

The following speaker was **Ms. Liora Abergel**, a youth representing the Likrad project of the Swiss Federation of Jewish communities and a student of political science. The idea of the Likrad project is a project of outreach and interaction with Jewish- and non-Jewish youth in Swiss society. Young people understand the need for pride in people's origins, religion, culture and traditions. Young people are educated to become Likratinos, whom we might call youth ambassadors, to address especially teenagers, with the classroom as the stage. Exchange on this level is more sustainable than a theoretical lesson from a teacher. Likratinos want to spread tolerance and exchange with other youths. Anti-semitism and other disagreeable experiences are unfortunately still there, but it has become less "cool" to hate other faiths and traditions. Ms. Abergel said that to stand up for tolerance and respect for each other is a good way to empower youth. The teenagers of today will be the leaders of tomorrow; therefore, it is important to exchange ideas beyond the barriers of communities and work together for a peaceful co-existence.

The next speaker, **Ms. Laleh Ashrafi**, intern of the United Nations Organisation of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Geneva, started out by stating that youth and peace can lead to different dimensions, one can go to more political levels and the other more to community and national levels. On the political level things go very slowly, but on a national and community level there can quickly be tangible results. Youth are known for their potential as agents for change, but there are still many barriers. One such barrier is "othering", when society sees youth as a source of violence and terrorism. Because of the threat of manipulation to radical agendas, political and religious leaders tend to hold young people back in order to avoid negative outcomes. This leads to a growing frustration among the younger generation, who feel, "We are not heard". Of course, people are responsible at least partially for their decisions. But there should be greater efforts made to give youth the tools to be valuable contributors. Especially among religious leaders, there are sometimes gaps and misunderstandings that can cause confusion, even desperation among young people. There is a growing attitude among young people to be tolerant towards different faiths, cultures, traditions and races. Policy- and decision makers need to be reminded to focus more on empowering youth and young people to take on responsible roles in society.

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As the last speaker of the panel, Mr. **Dimitry Samko**, President of UPF in Moscow Russia, a graduate from a Moscow based technical University, who is married and young parent of 2 children, took the floor. He expressed his belief that there is often a big gap between decision makers and young people. Young people are underrepresented in current society. In order for young people to get involved, there has to be trust. He then presented an initiative of sports for peace through the “Peace-road project” showing an activity that the young generation could easily embrace: running or cycling for peace is easy and all young people can participate. The young generation receives a lot of teaching in schools and sometimes it is like “propaganda” and the teachers are desiring to create a certain outcome. Because of this, young people are not so confident anymore and they usually act differently once presented with a concrete project. The Peace-road project is very inoffensive and at the same time can be easily monitored. It manages to inspire young people to take up some concrete action for a noble cause opening up people’s mind for a positive vision and perspectives. Sports and sports-like projects for peace can really motivate youth.

Mr. Samko mentioned at the end that with the “Peace-road” project Russian youth even managed to go into North Korea and inspire people there for a future world of peace without borders.

A lively question and answer session brought about various issues, one of them about how religions can empower youth more. **Sheikh Nuru** emphasized the need to mentor youth and to give them some tools so that they can do something positive. “Encourage them to take initiative and give them the opportunity and space to do something constructive!”

Another point of discussion was the question about economic issues that prevent the empowerment of young people. **Dr. Béglé** expressed that indeed the economic difficulty is a great obstacle to youth empowerment. Frustration about the lack of a basic income can be a door to radicalization for youth. One of the problems of developing countries that prevents youth from getting empowered is the dire economic situation in the developing world. People get tempted to believe in migration to “the rich countries”. There is a need for intergenerational and interreligious cooperation for youth empowerment, so that things can substantially change. Peace efforts can be made by religious leaders, but the opportunities offered can only be best applied by young people themselves. Creating an economic system that is viable is like a bright star for young people to look up to.

On the question about youth disengagement, **Ms. Liora Abigel** of the Likrad project, stated that she considered that there are not enough of platforms for youth to bring in their potential and ideas. She mentioned that her Likrad project is one way to create empowerment of youth to be engaged in general issues.

Ms. Laleh Ashrafi responded to the question of what international organizations could do to empower youth, that international organizations are creating youth initiatives and programs in partnership with civil society. Also, through the creation of internships for young people, international organizations can stimulate capacity building and awareness on how youth can create their own successful project.

On the question of government support of the project, **Mr. Samko** mentioned that the Russian authorities on various levels reacted very positively and supportively towards “Peace-road”.

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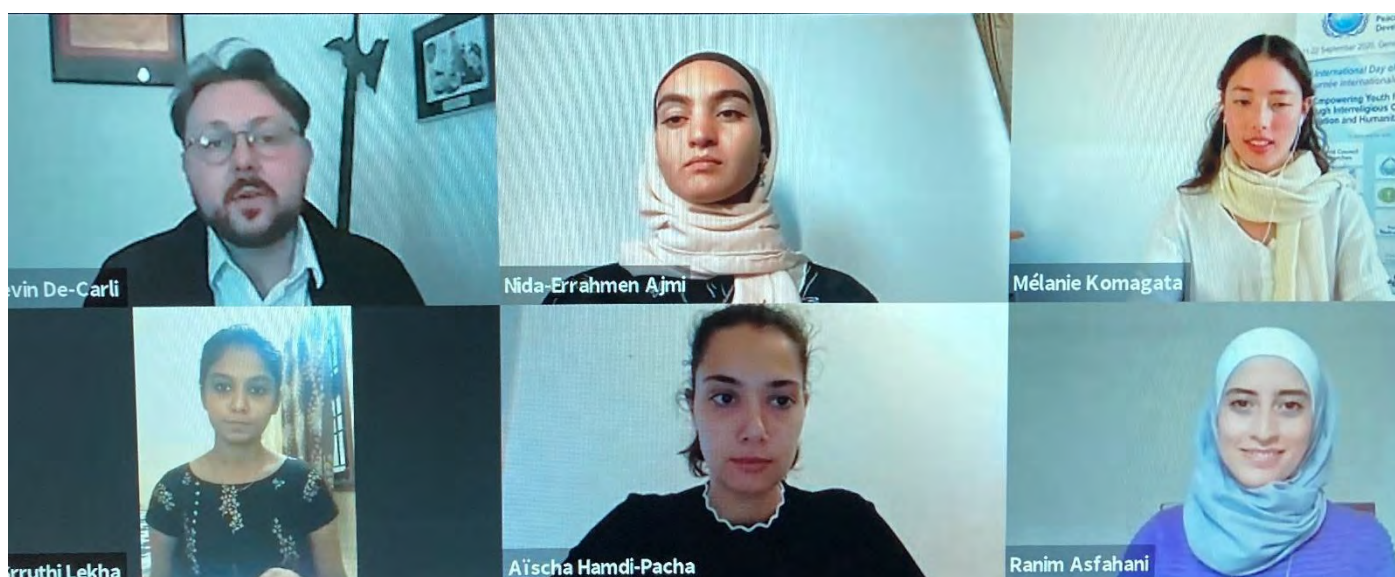


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In response to the question about what IAPD could do to serve more effectively the cause of World Peace and Human development, there were a number of suggestions, among them notably, to teach youth tolerance combined with passion. Another suggestion was that IAPD could help to form Interfaith Youth Councils for Peace to stimulate positive exchanges and harmony among local faith communities. The session ended after a lively discussion with a quote from the session chair, Ms. Carolyn Handschin, quoting the founder of WFP, Dr Hak Ja Han-Moon: “The world cannot change through political changes alone, the world changes when people change.”

September 22, 2020 afternoon session:



14:00 Session II

12th Interfaith Youth Council (IYC) Assembly

Special Session on: “Empowering Youth for Peace through Interreligious Cooperation, Education and Humanitarian Action.”

Moderator, Rabbi Kevin De-Carli, President, GIIA Interfaith Youth Council

Speaker 1, Mélanie Komagata, International Association of Youth/Students for Peace, Switzerland

Speaker 2, Srruthi Lekha Raaja Elango, UN representative of WFP Geneva, India

Speaker 3, Nida-Errahmen Ajmi representative of Islam

Speaker 4, Ranim Asfahani, Edinburgh, Scotland

Speaker 5, Aïscha Hamdi-Pacha Representative from Iras Cotis

Q & A

As a special feature, the Model UN Interfaith Youth Panel was convened with the UN and submitted to the General Assembly of the United Nations as part of a global call for youth initiatives to their “**UN SDG Action Zone**” project.

The Model UN Interfaith Youth Council session was the 12th session since its founding in 2008. **This time the Interfaith Youth Council of the Geneva Interfaith Intercultural Alliance (GIIA)** brought together youth of 5 different faiths: **Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Unificationism**. The youth delegates presented their perspectives based on the main title and the UN SDG Action Zone Project requirements. First among the highly interesting points mentioned was the importance of good role models for youth,

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particularly within their close family surroundings, through the positive and empowering influence of parents and siblings from their direct social environment. This supported the point of the value and importance of a good family environment for children to grow up in. Another crucial point emerging from the youth panel was the need for youth to have dreams and through intergenerational cooperation to allow those dreams to be striven for in a young person's life. Role models for good leadership are necessary to be promoted in society as in these difficult times we cannot count on all families to fulfill the role of good mentorship. Empowering youth for peace cannot be neglected and has to be sustainable. Also, only exemplary peace leadership can really empower youth to become engaged for peace; and youth will require practical tools and examples of peace leadership through concrete (humanitarian) action.

Another presenter stressed the point that youth need opportunities, space and trust, to feel confident and empowered. Among youth the situation of migrants, especially the children of migrant families who were born here, but originate from a different culture than our European, Christianity-based culture and tradition, is very challenging. The testimony of one of the presenters, as a female from an Islamic background, born in Switzerland but growing up in her strict family environment was very touching. She described her situation as a female soldier in the Swiss military as a great challenge, firstly, because of being a young woman and secondly being a woman of Arabic origin with an Islamic family background. The Swiss Military like many other institutions is increasingly confronted with these important changes and this new multicultural reality and will have to put in place some mechanism to cope with the needs of those young people in their particular situations. In a more and more multicultural society, there is a need for appropriate measures to guide and help youth in these specific circumstances.

A good quality education can make a huge difference in the current world for young people to feel empowered. There is a need for youth from different cultures, ethnicities, and religions to be mentored properly so that they can contribute the wealth of their difference to the whole of society. Difference should be considered as a plus, rather than a minus or a liability. Almost all felt that it would be greatly beneficial to have educational programs for global citizenship for young people in order to cope well with the current reality. Another point regarding empowering youth was sports as a means to create bonds among youth from different backgrounds. There is a need for religious and political leaders in society to look at young people with new eyes - as agents for change!

Several panelists expressed that this new multicultural reality for a country like Switzerland cannot be ignored. It is important for society to face the challenge of diversity and to find new ways to live together. If this isn't done, there will be parallel societies and a fracture of the social fabric that could lead to tensions in the long run. Some panelists expressed their resolve and engagement to reduce prejudice and tensions by getting to know each other better.

The Panelists decided based on the discussions to collect the conclusions from the various presentations and to formulate a common statement and resolution that will be published later as an outcome of the panel.



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Closing:

Mr. Heiner W. Handschin, Coordinator IAPD Europe & Middle East

Mr. Handschin of IAPD invited in closing two representatives of the organizing partners to offer some closing remarks.

Dr. Michael Balcomb, President Chairperson FFWPU Europe and Middle East, valued the speakers and thanked them for their great efforts and contributions. Youth are instrumental for bringing about peace and human development. He emphasized that peace starts with us, with ME. He mentioned that there are two important sides to any peace-making effort: one is to strive for justice with the determination to correct wrong things; the other side is compassion and the readiness to embrace people with the goal to encourage change. The founders of UPF and FFWPU, the Rev. & Mrs. Moon, embody these two qualities as a couple and we can understand that both sides of parental nature, though different, are equally important.

Dr. Taj Hamad, Head of IAPD International, Vice-President of UPF International, presented some congratulatory remarks for all the good outcomes and presentations of the panel and speakers and highlighted some important points regarding the need for youth to sit at the table of decision making and to take charge of shaping the future of our world. Youth can surely learn from the vision of the great religions so that wise decisions can be made. Religions can again become relevant in the process of creating a world of lasting peace. Interreligious dialogue is important but more important is the point that “we go beyond dialogue and work together to tackle the urgent concerns in the current world”. He reported that, as we had done, also on September 21st, the UN General Assembly in New York celebrated the International Day of Peace with the motto: Shaping peace together. He was so impressed by the passion and conviction of youth expressed in their presentations.

The conference and session ended after the two interventions with a final screen shot of all the speakers and staff who made the event possible. (Below is the link to all the video transcripts of the sessions.)

<https://www.facebook.com/upf.europe/videos/357683032257035>



(Report by IAPD Europe & Middle East, September 27, 2020)

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