

Presentation on fostering working partnership between Ombudsman and Religious Leaders in Africa to build peaceful co-existence, social cohesion, human dignity and preventing violent extremism and hate speech

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Your Excellencies

Distinguished & Honorable Ombudsman and Mediators from different African Countries

Distinguished staff of The African Ombudsmen Research Centre

Respected participants of the training

Dear brothers and Sisters

On behalf of the 204 member organizations of the United Religions Initiative (URI) from diverse religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions in 31 African countries I present you greetings of peace and blessing.

URI is an international interfaith organization with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council and it is working to promote enduring daily inter-faith cooperation to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, healing and justice for the Earth and all living beings.

URI is cultivating peaceful coexistence among different religions and cultures by engaging people to bridge religious and cultural differences and work together for the good of their communities and their environment.

URI-Africa signed memorandum of understanding and working in partnership with African Union, AOMA, IGAD, UNFPA-Africa Regional Office, Africa Media Initiative, Regional centre Against Small Arms and light Weapons and many other organizations as URI strongly believe in the value of working in close partnership as stated on the Sustainable Development Goal 17.

Allow me to thank at the outset the African Ombudsman Research Centre for organizing this timely and important training opportunity for African Ombudsman and Mediators as part of the centre endeavor for capacity building of the ombudsman and Mediators in Africa.

I also want to take this opportunity to extend my appreciation and acknowledgment for the excellent work of the centre since its inception. I also want to recognize the commitment, vision, action and outstanding leadership of the Director of the centre.

It is indeed a great honor and pleasure for me to be with you today to reflect on the need of fostering working partnership between Ombudsman and Religious Leaders in Africa to build peaceful co-existence, social cohesion, human dignity and preventing violent extremism and hate speech

If due attention, resource and all political support is given to the African Ombudsman & Mediators they can play a leading role to be the force of positive change that brings people of diverse nations and cultures together to build trust, national cohesion, social justice and prevent misunderstanding, mistrust, marginalization and violent conflict which leads to atrocities.

Having an active and effective Institution of Ombudsman & Mediators in Africa is critical ingredient for member states to safe guard rule of law, justice, good governance, human right and build social cohesion, peaceful coexistence and to resolve conflict. It is also very important added value to the work of African Union to achieve the Agenda 2063 of the Africa we want which is a Peaceful, United and Prosperous Africa.

Building and fostering practical working partnerships with different stakeholders special with religious and traditional leaders in Africa will be of paramount importance in the work of the African Ombudsman & Mediators in their effort of peace-building as Peace-building is a process that facilitates the establishment of durable peace and tries to prevent the recurrence of violence by addressing root causes and effects of conflict through reconciliation, institution building, and political as well as economic transformation.

The other areas where African Ombudsman & Mediators need to pay due attention in terms of fostering close working partnership with Religious Leaders in Africa are: building social cohesion, reconciliation, peaceful coexistence, human dignity and the prevention of violent extremism and hate speech

As you know it faith matters to many people in Africa. Throughout Africa, faith-based organizations (FBOs) and religious leaders (RLs) are influential in both the political and social spheres, and have a broad following in society. Their presence in local communities, coupled with their capacity to deliver critical services, allow them to mobilize grassroots support, earn the trust of vulnerable groups, and influence cultural norms – all of which make them vital stakeholders in all effort for peace, promoting human dignity and social development.

With their involvement in local communities and their standing as moral leaders, many FBOs and RLs command the respect of local and national authorities, which can make them valuable peace mediators in tense environments and also good partners for Ombudsman in Africa.

Working with FBOs and RLs is especially crucial in areas where governance structures are weak and fail to ensure human rights and administer basic services, including in relation to protection, justice and education. It is very important for African Ombudsman to engage FBOs and RLs in many areas including promoting good governance, sustainable development, conflict prevention, peace building, and promoting women's rights and gender equality.

Partnering either informally or through formal agreements between Ombudsman and FBOs and RLs need to be based on shared values, objectives and commitments, in particular as they relate to gender equality and women's empowerment, and respect for universal human rights

As you know religion has become an important topic on the agenda of our world and policy makers are becoming more aware of the role of religions in conflict prevention, peace-building and reconciliation and preventing and countering violent extremism and hate speech.

Too often, acts of violence are committed in the name of religion though this has nothing to do with the basic teaching of religions. Violence can never be justified in the name of God.

Different religious leaders in Africa need to work together more than ever in partnership with African Ombudsman and Mediators to safeguard human dignity, promote inter and intra religious constructive dialogue for a culture of peace, compassion, respect for life and non-violence to prevail in Africa.

Religious leaders in Africa also need to work together along with Ombudsman and all other relevant stake holders to address the issue of hate speech, prevent and counter violent extremism, radicalization and terrorism in Africa as terrorism continues to be one of the most serious threats to human dignity, social development, peace and security in Africa.

In order to counter radicalization and violent extremism and to reduce vulnerability to extremist ideology it is also important to address issues such as poverty, deprivation and marginalization, which provide a breeding ground to terrorism. In this respect, particular attention needs to be paid to the education and employment of the youth and to work with close partnership with Ministry of Youth, youth associations and organizations

Some of the reasons why it is very important to foster working partnership between Ombudsman and Religious Leaders and faith based organizations in Africa are:

- Historically, many faith actors have extended vital social services to local communities, especially humanitarian relief, health and education.
- The statements of religious or spiritual leaders often have more impact in communities than awareness-raising workshops by other organizations.
- In remote and conflict-prone areas, houses of worship or faith-based services extend physical protection and vital space for humanitarian response.
- Faith actors have a strong grassroots presence, working in inaccessible areas often not covered by government services.
- During conflicts, they tend to remain on the ground after other humanitarian actors have left, ensuring sustainability.
- Local engagement through FBOs can encourage dialogue, deter further violence and address enduring issues such as gender-based violence and forced recruitment of soldiers.

- Religion is often central to the social, cultural and moral fabric of communities, and many religious organizations see their work as serving a higher call to support humanity.
- Representatives of FBOs and RLs may be seen as gate-keepers, opinion leaders and in some contexts are more trusted and influential than secular leaders in their communities.
- FBOs have the ability to communicate with beneficiaries and make vulnerable communities' voices heard. Because of this legitimacy, FBOs and RLs can be sensitized to reach out to women and marginalized groups when other actors cannot.
- FBOs are increasingly at the forefront of public policy advocacy.
- This expanding area of engagement with FBOs holds much promise for ensuring human dignity, gender equality, promoting good governance and social inclusion and minimizing conflict.
- Often, engagement around human rights begins with the engagement of FBOs. In fragile states, working with FBOs is a critical means of building capacity for stable and democratic governance, and instilling positive and inclusive social values. The consistent involvement of FBOs and RLs over time can support sustainability in areas with weak governance structures.
- FBOs and RLs have extensive networks of congregations, affiliates and individuals. These networks constitute remarkable channels of communication as well as human and financial resources. Such large national constituencies hold great potential to complement the work of Ombudsman and Mediators in Africa.
- Religious organizations have a very high commitment to peace. They motivate action by emphasizing compassion and service, unity and interconnectedness, and justice and reconciliation. Faith actors mobilize large numbers of highly motivated and skilled volunteers, who see volunteering as part of their calling and strive towards peaceful development.
- Religious authorities need to be involved in countering regional and national narratives that support violence. Many religious communities are already engaged in activities countering violent extremism. Their participation is instrumental, especially in conflict areas and fragile states: communities that are not included in dialogue and peace processes can actually become more vulnerable to violent extremism.
- FBOs and RLs have been pivotal in developing key concepts of peace and non-violence as well as creating peace.
- Faith actors can engage a range of stakeholders in positive dialogue to identify entry points for reconciliation.
- Partnerships with community leaders of all kinds are critical to African Ombudsman and Mediators engagement in ending violence.

I am so happy to inform you that it is with the above core points in mind that AOMA and URI-Africa signed the memorandum of understanding in 2017 to enhance the working partnership between ombudsman and Religious Leaders in Africa.

Your Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen

While I am addressing on the need of enhancing the working partnership for Ombudsman & Mediators in Africa with Religious Leaders I would like also to emphasize strongly on the need of the Ombudsmen and Mediators in Africa to working in close partnership with Traditional & cultural leaders in Africa to enhance the issue of good governess, promoting a culture of peace, reconciliation and national cohesion as the traditional leaders bring to the table the society values based on cultural, moral, indigenous and traditional as well

I want to bring to your kind attention also on the need of working in partnership with the media, parliamentarians, civil society organizations, Interfaith organizations, community leaders, women and youth associations in the effort of peace-building and conflict prevention..

Your Excellence and ladies and gentlemen

Peaceful co-existence, social cohesion, human dignity, mutual respect, good governance, justice and harmony among people of different ethnicity, culture and followers of different religions can be significantly enhanced by the teaching of the Golden Rule which says “Treat others the way you want to be treated”.

In this more than ever interconnected world, promoting Golden Rule is the pathway to build peaceful co-existence, national cohesion and human dignity and secure a better future for this generation and generation yet to come and the best tool to address the problem of violent extremism and hate speech

Reflecting on the Golden Rule will help us to understand the interdependence of human beings and celebrate our cultural and religious diversity and to get to know each other and build trust and understating and in doing this we are avoiding the fear of the unknown which is causing the problem of mistrust which also leads to conflict and hate speech

Among the many reasons why we need to pay due attention for the teaching of the Golden Rule as the pathway for peaceful co-existence, harmony and promoting human right, mutual respect, dignity and security:

- It call us to extend our concern beyond ourselves and to embrace a greater understanding and respect for others
- It is affirmed in many religions, traditions, indigenous cultures and secular philosophies as a fundamental principle of life and the foundation on which a global ethic is founded
- It is a universal message which is accepted and embraced throughout the world
- Its message is simple, universal and powerful
- It is the most prevalent and universal moral principle in human history
- It summarize the basic teaching of compassion, non-violence, respect, honoring the dignity of all living beings, social justice, equal right, and peaceful co-existence.

- It is the best guide we have to help peoples of the world to live together in mutual respect and harmony
- It is a preventive mechanism to discrimination, disrespect, greedy, violence, crime, hate speech, incitement which leads to war and the violation of human right.
- It is the roadmap for inter-religious and inter-cultural harmony
- Reflecting on the Golden Rule is to reflect from the perspective of universal wisdom of the world.
- It can help to reverse the insane trends prevailing today in our world
- It is the best way to counter violent extremism and radicalization
- It is a fundamental principle that addresses critical issues such as democracy, human rights, mutual respect for each other, gender equality, and constructive dialogue among nations
- It transcends our differences and encourages us to consider the well-being of all humanity
- It helps to recognize pluralism and respect diversity.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen

Finally my recommendations are as follow:

- To organize a meeting between Ombudsmen and Religious Leaders in Africa along with African Parliamentarian Union (PAP) to establish a common platform and network to enhance working partnership on promoting a culture of peace, social cohesion, human dignity and prevention of violent extremism and hate speech (This meeting can be organized in the upcoming meeting of the Ombudsmen & Mediators of Africa and there are faith based and interfaith organizations who express strong interest to organize this event)
- African Ombudsmen & Mediators to work with their respective parliamentarians to introduce on the strong need to introduce peace education as part of the school curriculum starting from the KG as one practical step to peace-building and conflict prevention in Africa.
- There is also a strong need for Ombudsmen and Religious Leaders in Africa to bring to the attention of the policy makers in Africa on the need to come up with clear policy against hate speech and incitements.
- Golden Rule Day to be proclaimed across Africa as common shared moral value and ethics to promote human dignity, mutual respect and peaceful co-existence
- Promote inter-religious cooperation on various social issues of relevance to communities, in particular through joint activities with Ombudsmen and Mediators to strengthen community cohesion and convey peaceful messages to the communities on a regularly base through different media outlet
- Encourage and support interreligious dialogue activities, in particular those with initiatives aimed at monitoring, preventing and countering incitement to violence

- Work with the media to publicize positive stories of religious and secular actors who have countered violent extremist narratives, as well as news and information about initiatives aimed at enhancing mutual respect and peaceful coexistence
- Promote the universal declaration of human right in partnership with faith based organizations
- Promote the common moral and theological ground rooted in religious traditions and teaching, which confirms the principles and values of the universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Promoting education on common citizenship inclusive of cultural, ethnicity and religious diversity
- Strengthening good governance, human rights and rule of law in partnership with religious and traditional leaders and engage actively the youth and women
- Encourage religious leaders and actors to preach universal messages of peace and respect and fight against all forms of discrimination based on class, caste, race, ethnicity, religion or belief
- Work in partnership with relevant organizations and media associations to develop a code of ethics for journalists to prevent and counter incitement to violence
- Promote the spirit of UBUNTU
- Ensure that Religious and Traditional leaders are consulted and engaged actively in the work of Ombudsmen and Mediators in Africa in promoting and guaranteeing all human rights for every person in their country on all existing legally codified commitments no matter their age, status, gender, ethnic origin or religion
- Advocate against gender-based violence

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen

Finally I want to say that we need to acknowledge that peace and positive change is only possible in our respective countries and Africa at large when each and every citizen take responsibility and make peace within ourselves, families and in our respective communities.

Each of us needs to commit ourselves as best as we can to become a non-violent and make personal pledges for peace and protect human dignity in our daily life.

The issue of human right, justice and peaceful coexistence is something we all need to be active participants and stake holders as it is through collective effort that we can help to achieve it.

May Peace Prevail in our mind

May Peace Prevail in our heart

May Peace Prevail in our family

May Peace Prevail in our community

May Peace Prevail in our respective countries

May Peace Prevail in Africa

May Peace Prevail on Earth