

Brief overview of IHEU projects advancing the implementation of the Rabat Plan of Action & Faith 4 Rights initiative

Brief presentation of some IHEU work on combatting incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, and working to lessen discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, and to enhance the role of faith-based and non-faith-based actors in the defence of human dignity and human rights.

BACKGROUND: THE IHEU

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is the global representative body of the humanist movement, uniting a diversity of non-religious organisations and individuals. It has more than 130 humanist, rationalist, secular, ethical culture, atheist and freethought organizations as members across over 50 countries. Founded in Amsterdam in 1952, our vision is a Humanist world; a world in which human rights are respected and where everyone is able to live a life of dignity and freedom. We work to build and represent the global Humanist movement that defends human rights and promotes Humanist values worldwide.

Headquartered in London, United Kingdom, IHEU is an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) with representation on various international bodies, including: Special Consultative Status at the United Nations in Geneva, Vienna, and New York (including General Consultative Status at UNICEF); observer status at the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (Banjul); General Consultative Status at the Council of Europe (Strasbourg), and a partner in human rights with UNESCO (Paris). It also engages with the European Commission, European Parliament and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

As an organisation with an extensive reach and network of motivated members, we seek to better the global understanding of human rights, including, and prominently, the rights to religion or belief (FoRB) and free expression, as well as lessen discrimination, persecution and violence against individuals of all beliefs and none.

<http://iheu.org/>

1. IMPROVING FORB LITERACY

(Recommendation 56, Rabat Plan of Action; F4R Commitment)

One way in which we aim to improve literacy of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and the issues surrounding this fundamental right – which is essential in combating extremism and anti-human rights initiatives grounded in the instrumentalization of religion for malicious ends – is to produce an annual report. *The Freedom of Thought Report* gives an overview on the situation for freedom of religion or belief, with a focus on the situation for humanists and freethinkers, in every country in the world.

<http://freethoughtreport.com/>

2. HELPING END BLASPHEMY LAWS TO HELP PROMOTE FORB AND FREE EXPRESSION FOR ALL

(Recommendation 25, Rabat Plan of Action)

The Rabat Plan of Action is clear in its call for all states that have blasphemy laws to repeal them. On blasphemy laws, the Plan of Action says:

“At the national level, blasphemy laws are counterproductive, since they may result in de facto censure of all inter-religious or belief and intra-religious or belief dialogue, debate and criticism, most of which could be constructive, healthy and needed. In addition, many blasphemy laws afford different levels of protection to different religions and have often proved to be applied in a discriminatory manner. There are numerous examples of persecution of religious minorities or dissenters, but also of atheists and non-theists, as a result of legislation on what constitutes religious offences or overzealous application of laws containing neutral language. Moreover, the right to freedom of religion or belief, as enshrined in relevant international legal standards, does not include the right to have a religion or a belief that is free from criticism or ridicule.” (Rabat Plan of Action, §19)

To this end the IHEU founded and coordinates the *End Blasphemy Laws* campaign. The coalition behind the campaign seeks to achieve its goal by:

- Reaching out to new partners, across religious and secular communities, human rights groups, and all advocates for freedom of expression, wherever they are in the world.
- Raising public awareness of the scope, prevalence and in many countries the extreme severity of “blasphemy” laws; undertaking media work, coordinating social media campaigns and assisting national groups in developing advocacy based on experience among our partners.
- Providing research, resources and support for campaigners, activists, and policy-makers on the topic, e.g. blasphemy contravenes international human rights obligations.
- Enabling national NGOs and individual activists including human rights groups and free expression advocates, religious and secularist groups, to press for repeal locally.
- Defending freedom of expression at international fora.

The intention of the coalition is to make it as broad as possible and inclusive of a range of secular, humanist and faith-based organisations. An invitation to join was extended to participants at the Rabat+5 meeting and the IHEU is keen to make this happen.

<https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/>

3. ENGAGEMENT WITH UN AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS TO PROMOTE FORB AND COOPERATION

The IHEU engages with UN special procedure mechanisms including the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), and treaty bodies, to hold States to account on their international human rights obligations and commitments around forb, free speech and incitement to hatred, hostility or violence.

Along with supporting the Rabat Plan of Action, the IHEU has been an active participant in the *Faith 4 Rights* initiative of the OHCHR.

It is also part of the *Fez Process* - initiated by the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect - which engages religious actors in combatting incitement to violence and atrocities. Along with participating in the Asia-Pacific regional meeting in Bangkok, the IHEU also participated in the implementation meeting in Vienna.

The IHEU has also been part of an initiative led by Christian Solidarity Worldwide seeking to establish an EU annual day on the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief, so as to raise awareness of the right, its centrality to combatting intolerance, hate and incitement and to encourage a broader range of actors to work to promote it at all levels.

4. INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE INTER-FAITH AND (NON) BELIEF WORK AT THE UN LEVEL

(Faith 4 Rights, Commitment 1)

The IHEU initiated, drafted and coordinated a statement joined by a range of faith-based and secular organisations at the 36th session of the UN Human Rights Council calling on states to better engage with issues surrounding the right to freedom of religion or belief, particularly given less than 2.5% of recommendations made during the Universal Periodic Review concern FoRB. <http://iheu.org/humanists-secularists-faith-groups-join-together-remind-un-importance-freedom-religion-belief/>

It continues to make joint statements and host joint events with faith-based organisations at the UN and elsewhere.



The IHEU engages with the UN NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief in both Geneva and New York. Its director of advocacy is vice chair in Geneva.

The IHEU is also an associate partner of the Freedom of Religion or Belief Learning Platform, a major educational project on freedom of religion or belief led by the Nordic Ecumenical Network on International Freedom of Religion or Belief (NORFORB). <http://www.forb-learning.org>

5. CONNECTING OUR GLOBAL MEMBERSHIP WITH UN PROGRAMMES AND MECHANISMS

(Faith 4 Rights, Commitment 1)

The IHEU is always keen that it supports and helps engage grassroots activists and members in the processes encouraged by the Rabat Plan of Action and the Faith4Rights initiative; part of that is done through providing members with briefings, training and support in engaging with UN mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review.

It has also been lucky enough to have the current and previous UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief speaking at its General Assembly as well as other events, which has helped awareness-raising amongst members and increase their engagement in promoting the right to freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and counter incitement based on belief.

The IHEU also supports members who engage with faith-based organisations on human rights initiatives at the national or regional level. For instance, Africa-based IHEU members have been involved in a coalition campaigning against witchcraft-related abuse work in Malawi, which included humanists and religious actors working together to improve certainly religious literacy, understanding and interpretation.