

Check against delivery



**Statement of  
Ahmed Shaheed  
UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief**

**UN General Assembly**

**New York, 20 October 2020**



Honorable Chair,  
Your Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,

It is an honour to present my annual thematic report to the 75<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly and to update you on the activities I have undertaken pursuant to my mandate.

This past March, I reported to the Human Rights Council on the intersections between freedom of religion or belief and the right to non-discrimination on the basis of gender. Over the past year, I issued 52 communications to States aimed at ensuring respect for freedom of religion or belief. I have continued to monitor antisemitism – on which I reported to the Assembly last year - and I welcome the appointment of a high-level focal point on antisemitism by the Secretary-General in response to my report’s recommendation.

Honourable Chair,

In March last year, the Human Rights Council adopted resolution 40/10; extending my mandate for an additional three years, while also urging States to “ensure that no one is discriminated against on the basis of his or her religion or belief in their access to education, medical care, employment, humanitarian assistance or social benefits”, and that everyone “has the right and the opportunity to have access, on general terms of equality, to public services in their country, without any discrimination on the basis of religion or belief”. Such an endeavor can prepare populations for a less vulnerable future by way of strengthening their intrinsic resilience through respecting, protecting and promoting human rights; including the right to freedom of religion or belief.

The belief that political threats, community tensions, violent conflict, neglect of public health, environmental damage, crime and discrimination all add to individual and community vulnerability was critical to shaping the goals and objectives set by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. But five years into the implementation of the SDGs, patterns of discrimination in all countries – rich and poor – continue to undermine the pursuit of sustainable development. Recent events stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, have exposed

considerable vulnerabilities engendered by myriad insecurities and magnify, on a daily basis, the adverse impacts that various forms of systemic discrimination and violations of fundamental human rights pose for the basic functioning of our societies, let alone our ambitious pursuits.

My current report identifies the various ways in which discriminatory laws and state practices, along with the unequal treatment by the rest of society engender environments wherein individuals and groups of people continue to be made more vulnerable than others by virtue of their perceived or actual religious or belief identity. And even if laws do not explicitly discriminate, the absence of effective policies for reducing inequalities and combatting discrimination continue to undermine the equal enjoyment of human rights by individuals and groups on account of their religion or belief.

These vulnerabilities have often evolved and persisted over long periods of time and may overlap with other forms of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity or geographic location. To a greater or lesser extent, discrimination may thus affect the way people that identify with certain religions or beliefs are treated in all spheres of society such as politics, education, employment, social and medical services, housing, the penitentiary system, law enforcement and the administration of justice in general. Left unchecked, such disparities and inequalities will continue to undermine future progress towards achieving sustainable development and threaten to reverse gains made towards realizing the SDGs.

Recognizing that no one will be left behind only when sustainable development efforts advance the political, social and economic inclusion of persons belonging to religious or belief minorities, I encourage States to employ specific indicators that highlight the legal, institutional, social or cultural status of affected populations. To assist States in their efforts to do so, I present a peer-reviewed indicators framework for assessing commitment to, and progress toward respecting, protecting and promoting the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.

I also encourage States to work with civil society in order to collect and publish data disaggregated by grounds of discrimination on the basis of religion or belief to enhance our understanding of inequalities involving religion or belief. It is my hope that this framework provides development

professionals, policymakers and human rights monitors alike with practical metrics, both qualitative and quantitative, to identify progress towards achieving freedom of religion of belief for all. I look forward to continued engagement on the model proposed in the coming months with experts, monitors, officials and rights-holders.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Among the most important targets for the advancement of the SDGs are those that focus on the social inclusion of the world's most marginalized populations. Persons belonging to religious or belief groups who endure disadvantages or deprivations that limit their rights and opportunities relative to others in society constitute those that have been 'left behind'. The relative disadvantage and vulnerabilities of these persons and groups must be effectively addressed by way of their inclusion, combatting discrimination and/or entrenched inequalities that impede them from participating in society on an equal basis - accessing the highest standards of education, obtaining land and property, technologies, acquiring wealth, and living healthier, longer, safer lives.

I look forward to engaging with governments and civil society actors alike and welcome your feedback and cooperation.

I thank you for your kind attention.