SDGs ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION 2026

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22 SEPT 2026
TUESDAY

10:00 AM - 2:00 PM EST

John Jay College of Criminal Justice
524 West 59th Street, New York, NY 10019

Roundtable Proceedings



JOURNALISTS AND WRITERS FOUNDATION · Religions for Peace Europe · INSTITUTI I DIALOGUT PRIZMI · ISTITUTO TEVERE · PEACE ISLANDS INSTITUTE NEW YORK · ATLANTIC INSTITUTE · NIAGARA FOUNDATION · RUMI FORUM

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The Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF) is an international civil society organization dedicated to the culture of peace, human rights, and sustainable development. The JWF promotes diversity and inclusion by creating forums for intellectual and social engagement; generates and shares knowledge with stakeholders, builds partnerships worldwide and develops policy recommendations for positive social change.

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* JWF is associated with the United Nations Department of Global Communications.

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As a part of the SDGs Conference 2026, the Journalists and Writers Foundation, in partnership with its 56 NGOs from 30 countries, is organizing the SDGs Roundtable Discussion 2026 to discuss critical issues to promote and protect sustainable peace and development. This side-event aims to create a platform for multiple stakeholders, including experts, practitioners, including civil society and youth leaders to raise awareness on social problems and exchange ideas on possible solutions to social, economic, and environmental issues.

Round 1: From Common Ground to the Common Good: Faith Communities Working Together | 10:30 AM – 12:00 AM EST

In today's interconnected world, the collaboration among diverse faith communities is more vital than ever in promoting sustainable peace, social cohesion, and inclusive development. Interfaith dialogue serves as a powerful platform for building understanding, breaking down barriers, and fostering collective action toward shared goals. Faith-based initiatives can play a critical role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals for a shared future.

This roundtable aims to explore how faith communities can work together to create more inclusive, resilient, and peaceful societies. The speakers will focus on how interfaith collaboration can empower marginalized voices, elevate women's participation in leadership, nurture the next generation of interfaith leaders, and harness emerging technologies like AI to enhance dialogue and cooperation.

By emphasizing mutual understanding and collective effort, faith communities can significantly contribute to building a more equitable, cohesive, and sustainable future for all.

Key areas for discussion include:

- **Empowering Marginalized Voices and Faith Communities:** Strategies for amplifying underrepresented groups and fostering inclusive participation within interfaith initiatives.
- **Building Inclusive Communities and Welcoming Refugees:** Supporting refugee resettlement, social justice and faith-based initiatives, emphasizing practical strategies and collaborative efforts to foster inclusivity and support for vulnerable populations.
- **Fostering the Next Generation of Interfaith Leaders:** Nurturing young leaders to sustain and expand interfaith efforts in diverse communities.
- **Training Interfaith Leaders: Interfaith Initiatives on Peacebuilding and Reconciliation:** sharing strategies and initiatives to nurture interfaith leaders to sustain and expand interfaith efforts in today's diverse communities.
- **Advancing International Religious Freedom in Coordination with Global Partner Organizations**: sharing perspectives and strategies in protecting religious freedom for everyone everywhere.

Through interfaith and intercultural dialogue, shared learning, and collective action, this roundtable seeks to strengthen the capacity of faith communities to work together effectively, contributing to the SDGs and fostering lasting peace and social harmony for future generations.

Round 2: Global Youth Voices on AI, Democracy, and Human-Rights Based Digitalization | 12:30 PM – 2:00 PM EST

As digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) become increasingly integrated into daily life, their implications for democracy, human rights, and social cohesion are profound. Young people, as both digital natives and active participants in societal change, are uniquely positioned to shape and influence the future of digitalization. Engaging youth voices in discussions around AI and digital governance is essential to ensure that technological advancements promote social good, uphold democratic values, and protect human rights.

This youth panel aims to provide a platform for young leaders and innovators to share insights, experiences, and innovative solutions related to AI and digitalization. The session will focus on empowering youth participation in governance, exploring AI's role in addressing societal challenges, and fostering responsible digital citizenship.

Key areas for discussion include:

- **Youth Participation in Governance and Human Rights Advocacy:** Discussing avenues for young people to influence policy and digital governance; highlighting youth-led advocacy and platforms that facilitate engagement with policymakers.

- **Youth Initiatives to Reduce Polarization, Hatred, and Hostility:** Presenting innovative projects aimed at fostering inclusivity, dialogue, and understanding in pluralistic societies; discussing the role of digital platforms and community engagement in building social cohesion.

- **Impact of AI on Democratic Processes and Civic Engagement:** Analyzing how AI influences electoral processes, public discourse, and civic participation; addressing challenges such as algorithmic bias, censorship, and digital manipulation.

- **AI for Social Good: Exploring the potential of AI to address global challenges** such as climate change, health crises, and inequality; showcasing youth-led projects and initiatives leveraging AI for positive social impact.

- **Innovative Approaches to Combat Misinformation and Enhance Media Literacy:** Sharing strategies and tools developed by youth to combat misinformation; promoting media literacy education to empower young people to critically evaluate information.

This youth panel will serve as a dynamic forum for young people to express their visions, share best practices, and collaborate on innovative solutions that leverage AI for democracy, human rights, and social cohesion. By elevating youth voices, we aim to foster a more inclusive and responsible digital future aligned with the principles of human rights and democratic participation.

PROGRAM DETAILS

Date | Time | Venue

Date: September 22, 2026 – Tuesday
Time: 10:00 AM – 2:00 PM EST
Venue: John Jay EDIT

Format

10:00 AM – 10:30 AM EST
OPENING SESSION
Welcome Remarks and Keynotes

10:30 AM – 12:00 PM EST
Round 1: : From Common Ground to the Common Good: Faith Communities Working Together

- Empowering Marginalized Voices and Faith Communities
- Building Inclusive Communities and Welcoming Refugees
- Fostering the Next Generation of Interfaith Leaders
- Training Interfaith Leaders: Interfaith Initiatives on Peacebuilding and Reconciliation
- Advancing International Religious Freedom in Coordination with Global Partner Organizations

12:00 PM – 12:30 PM EST
LUNCH BREAK

- Networking / Light food and drinks

12:30 PM – 2:00 PM EST
Round 2: Global Youth Voices on AI, Democracy, and Human-Rights Based Digitalization

- Youth Participation in Governance and Human Rights Advocacy
- Youth Initiatives to Reduce Polarization, Hatred, and Hostility
- Impact of AI on Democratic Processes and Civic Engagement
- AI for Social Good: Exploring the potential of AI to address Global Challenges
- Innovative Approaches to Combat Misinformation and Enhance Media Literacy

2:00 PM – 2:15 PM EST
Closing Remarks

- Closing Remarks and Photo Opportunity

Participants

Interfaith, civil society and youth leaders, including policymakers, academics, journalists, and practitioners worldwide will participate in the roundtable discussions and the workshops.



SDGs ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION 2026

22 September 2026, Tuesday | 10:00 AM – 2:00 PM EST

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OPENING SESSION

CLICK HERE to Watch the Opening Session

Abrar J. Hataman, Member of Parliament, Bangsamoro Transition Authority, Parliament of the Philippines - PHILIPPINES

Keynote Remarks

Abrar J. Hataman is a young Bangsamoro leader and legislator whose work is anchored in public service, inclusive governance, and community empowerment. A native of Sumisip, Basilan, he is the youngest legislator of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority representing the province. He serves as Chairperson of the Committee on Women, Youth, Children, and Persons with Disabilities, leading legislative efforts to advance the rights, welfare, protection, and meaningful participation of vulnerable and underserved sectors. Among the key measures he champions are the proposed Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities in the Bangsamoro and the Bangsamoro Gender and Development Code. His legislative priorities also include education, public health, sustainable livelihood, youth development, and inclusive governance.



How do we build trust in democratic principles, and what role must young people play in that work? I come to this discussion from a place where these questions are not merely matters of policy or theory, the Bangsamoro region. For us, democracy is not an abstract word. It is part of a journey marked by struggle, displacement, armed conflict, negotiation, reconciliation, and ultimately the difficult work of building institutions that people can trust.

The Bangsamoro story did not begin with the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. It`s roots reach much further back into the long history of the Moro people and their efforts to preserve their identity, dignity, and way of life through successive periods of colonial and national rule. By the late 1960s and 1970s, long-standing grievances had developed into an organized armed struggle. The emergence of the Moro National Liberation Front brought the Bangsamoro question into national and international political consciousness. In 1976, the Government of the Philippines and the MNLF entered into the Tripoli Agreement, one of the earliest major attempts to address conflict through an autonomous political arrangement. 20 years later, in 1996, the parties signed the Final Peace Agreement to implement that commitment.

But peace did not arrive simply because an agreement had been signed. Another peace process developed between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Years of negotiations eventually produced the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2012 and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2014, laying the foundation for a new political settlement and the establishment of the present autonomous government. This history matters because it tells us something important about peace: peace is not a single moment. It is a process of transformation. A struggle that had once been expressed largely through armed resistance was brought to the negotiating table. The negotiating table produced agreements. Those agreements were translated into law and created institutions. Eventually, those institutions had to place political authority in the hands of people through democratic rule.

The Philippine government enacted Republic Act No. 11054, also known as the Bangsamoro Organic Law, providing the legal framework for the new autonomous region and its parliamentary form of government. It was ratified through a plebiscite in 2019, and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao was formally inaugurated the same year. The Bangsamoro Transition Authority was then tasked with guiding the region's transition toward an elected parliamentary government.

The transition toward lasting peace was never an easy task. The BTA, or the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, had to transform the gains of the peace process into functioning institutions of self-governance while addressing the social and economic consequences of decades of conflict. Notwithstanding these challenges, the Bangsamoro Parliament advanced its legislative agenda. From

2019 to the present, a total of 474 bills and 822 resolutions were filed, while 94 Bangsamoro Autonomy Acts were enacted, providing the legal framework for the establishment, operation, and development of the region.

But lasting peace requires more than legislation. It requires the government to demonstrate every single day that peace improves people's lives. Peace is sustained when a child in a remote community can go to school; when a person with a disability can access public services with dignity; when women and children are protected; and when families affected by conflict can rebuild their livelihoods. Because ultimately, peace must not only be felt in the absence of conflict. It must be felt in the presence of care, inclusion, and hope.

This is one of the lessons I have carried into my work in the Bangsamoro Parliament. On the last stretch of the Transition Authority, I have been privileged to serve as the chairperson of the Committee on Women, Youth, Children, and Persons with Disabilities—a committee that deals deeply with the needs of the most vulnerable sectors of our region. Our responsibility is not simply to pass laws. It is to make sure that the law sees people who are too often unseen, and that women, children, young people, and persons with disabilities are not merely beneficiaries of the government but active citizens in our society.

One of the landmark policies being lobbied for before the Parliament is the proposed Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities in the Bangsamoro, through Parliament Bill No. 443. We seek to build a stronger regional framework for the rights, protection, participation, and inclusion of persons with disabilities. The measure seeks to address discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, education, health services, infrastructure, and other areas of public life. For me, this is what democratic peace must mean: peace must reach those who have historically been left at the margins.

The same principle applies to communities affected by conflict. On June 9, 2025, my own province, my hometown, Basilan, reached a milestone that would have been difficult to imagine during the darkest years of the conflict. Basilan was declared free from the influence and presence of the Abu Sayyaf Group. Following years of military operations, local and national government cooperation, community engagement, and peacebuilding interventions, assorted loose firearms were turned over to the government's Small Arms and Light Weapons program as part of the continuing effort toward normalization. But the deeper achievement is not simply that weapons were surrendered or that a security declaration was made. That deeper achievement is reconciliation. Former combatants and conflict-affected communities must be given pathways toward reintegration, livelihood, education, health, and dignity. Peace must create alternatives to violence. It must create opportunities for people to choose a different future.

This generation owes great respect to the generations before us who carried the burden of conflict, negotiated peace, and made difficult compromises in order to pave the way for a different future for our children. But peace is not an inheritance that we can simply receive. It is a responsibility that every generation must sustain.

That is the spirit behind our work beyond the halls of Parliament. Through my social arm, Akon Bangsamoro, we have sought to translate the idea of peace into practical assistance through initiatives supporting education, health, livelihood, and employment.

These may appear to be small interventions when compared with the scale of the Bangsamoro peace process. But peace is also built through small acts of service. A student who receives support to take the licensure examination is given an opportunity to become a professional. A volunteer teacher who receives support is encouraged to continue serving a community that government services may not yet fully reach. A family that receives basic medical assistance is reminded that they have not been forgotten.

On September 14, 2026, the transition reached a historic stage. For the first time, the people of the Bangsamoro went to the polls to elect the members of the first regular Bangsamoro Parliament. The election was conducted across 32 parliamentary districts, with more than 2 million registered voters. For those looking at the ballot, it was an election. For the Bangsamoro, it represents something much bigger. It is one of the clearest signs of how far a society can travel when political conflict is gradually transformed through dialogue, legislation, institutions, and participation. The ballot box has become another instrument of peace.

This is where young people enter the story. The generation growing up in the Bangsamoro today is inheriting a political landscape very different from the one inherited by their ancestors. Many did not experience armed conflict in the same way. Some know it through the stories of their parents; others through communities shaped by displacement and conflict. Our responsibility is therefore different. We are being asked to make peace work. That requires more than exercising the right to suffrage. It means understanding institutions, participating and asking difficult questions of government, defending the rights of minorities and marginalized communities, and accepting that democratic participation carries responsibilities: to listen, to disagree without dehumanizing, to respect lawful institutions, and to recognize the dignity of people with whom we disagree.

Young people are growing up in a digital public space where information travels across communities in seconds. Political claims can spread before they are verified. Manipulated images can appear authentic. Artificial intelligence can make communication more accessible, but it can also make deception more sophisticated. The challenge is therefore not simply to give young people access to technology. It is to equip them with the judgment to use it responsibly. The concerns of AI, misinformation, media literacy, polarization, and digital peacebuilding are connected to the same question we have confronted in the Bangsamoro for decades: How do we build a political community in which people can disagree without returning to conflict?

In the past, instruments of conflict were guns, displacement, and physical confrontation. Today, conflict can also be amplified through screens, false information, and deepened mistrust.

Algorithms can reinforce divisions. Digital platforms can either widen democratic participation or intensify social fragmentation. There is another dimension to this conversation that is particularly meaningful in the Bangsamoro: the role of faith. Our peace process has involved not only political institutions but also communities, religious leaders, civil society, women, youth, traditional leaders, and international partners. Our experience has taught us that faith can become a source of division when manipulated. But it can also become a powerful language of reconciliation when grounded in human dignity, justice, and responsibility.



In Islam, leadership is an "Amanah"; it is a trust. Public authority is therefore not simply a privilege. It is a responsibility entrusted to us by the people and ultimately accountable before God. This reminds those who hold public office that power is temporary. It reminds citizens that participation matters, and it reminds all of us that political differences should never erase our shared humanity. We should give young people more than a seat at the table. We should give them the knowledge, confidence, institutional space, and ethical foundation to contribute meaningfully when they arrive there. Because the future of democratic governance will not be secured simply by preserving the institutions we have built. It will depend on whether the next generation believes those institutions are worthy of their participation.

And the Bangsamoro journey offers a modest but powerful lesson to the world. A conflict that lasted for decades was not resolved by one agreement, one leader, or one generation. It required persistence, negotiation, compromise, legislation, institutions, and people willing to imagine a political future different from the one they inherited. The first regular parliamentary elections in the Bangsamoro region are therefore not the end of the journey. They are just another beginning.

And perhaps this is the message I would leave with my fellow young Bangsamoro and everyone present: Do not think of democracy as something already finished. Democracy is a practice. Peace is a practice. Trust is a practice. Every generation must build them again, and every generation of young Bangsamoro must carry them into the democratic life of our region. That means protecting what was achieved, learning what remains unfinished, and having the courage to improve the institutions entrusted to them. From struggle to negotiation, from negotiation to political settlement, from political settlement to autonomous governance, and from autonomous governance to democratic participation—that is the journey of the Bangsamoro. But the journey does not belong only to the Bangsamoro.

Every society represented in this room is confronting its own questions of trust, participation, technology, identity, and peace. Perhaps our shared task is to ensure the next generation inherits fewer conflicts to resolve and more institutions they can trust. Let's give young people not merely a future to inherit, but a democratic present in which they have a meaningful role. Because ultimately, peace becomes durable when people are given a voice in shaping the society in which they live. And democracy becomes credible when that voice is heard, respected, and protected by law.

Fr. Corey Brost, Co-Founder of the Children of Abraham Coalition, Executive Director of Viator House of Hospitality - USA

Keynote Remarks

Fr. Corey Brost, C.S.V., is Executive Director and co-founder of Viator House of Hospitality, a home for young adult men seeking asylum in the United States after escaping violence in their home countries. A member of the Clerics of St. Viator since 1987, he previously served as a religious educator, teacher, and high school administrator before dedicating himself full time to immigrant rights advocacy and interfaith bridge-building in 2016. Fr. Brost also co-founded the Children of Abraham Coalition in 2010 to counter faith-based prejudice and strengthen interfaith understanding. Based in Chicago's northwest suburbs, the volunteer-led nonprofit brings together Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i, and Christian leaders to promote interfaith relationships, reverence, and literacy. His work reflects a longstanding commitment to immigrant rights, interfaith cooperation, and building welcoming communities across religious and cultural differences.



You may struggle for hope in these very difficult times, and you may look around and say, "Where is the hope?" I do not have any special expertise to share with you other than stories of hope that I have been privileged to be part of and to witness through the interfaith work that I have been blessed to do. As a person of faith, who trusts the one God of all traditions, I firmly believe that God is resisting the hate and the despair that we see in our world, particularly for me, in our nation right now.

Our job is to believe and resist that despair with hope: by finding stories of hope, by connecting with those stories of hope, and then by being stories of hope. That is what my interfaith journey has let me do.

I grew up in a small town in central Illinois where I thought everyone was Catholic and white, which happens to not be the case. So, I did not really have the blessings of this type of diversity in my life as a child. But as I grew older and older, and as I became a Vincentian, a member of the Clerics of St. Viator, I felt within me, especially after the 9/11 attacks, the call to step out of my

white Catholic bubble to learn particularly about the beauty of Islam, and then beyond that, the beauty of the Abrahamic faiths, and beyond that, the beauty of all the faiths of the one God.

So, I studied Islam in seminary. One of the things that my professor did, which I am eternally grateful for, besides helping me learn in very concrete ways about the beauty of Islam and Islamic teachings and rituals, was expose me to interfaith work going on in the Chicago area. At that time, it was called the Interfaith Youth Core. Now it is called Interfaith America—bringing young people together for joint service and then teaching each other about the religions. So, as I got out into working, and I had my understanding of Islam, and then I took a couple of courses in Judaism as well to audit, I just felt enriched. I have to tell you that, as a man of God, as someone who professes faith, my view of God has been so beautified and enriched as I have seen God through the traditions of my sisters and brothers from other traditions. God is way too beautiful to be captured in one tradition alone, and I have learned that.

This was all triggered, my interfaith work after that study, by a Christian preacher in Florida in 2010 who made international news for wanting to burn the Quran because it was the instrument of the devil. And he identified as Christian. I identify as Christian. I said, "So I have a particular responsibility to do something because someone who identifies as Christian is spreading and causing hate and fear, especially toward folks I've come to know and friends—some Muslim friends." I started reaching out to local Muslim and Jewish communities, saying I would like to form a group called the Interfaith Coalition, called the Children of Abraham, that would bring together particularly Muslims, Jews, and Christians to do interfaith work, teach each other about each other's traditions, and learn how to stand up against hate, stereotypes, and violence. And so, I got nowhere.

But then God intervened, as God so often does when we try to put one step ahead of another along the right path. I had to go to the bank one day. I do not normally wear a collar. But I went to the bank and had to see a banker, who was wearing a hijab. I sat down because I was well trained by my professor and had seen the beauty of Islam and all its rituals. I sat down and said, "As-salamu alaykum," and she looked at me and then she said, "Wa alaykum as-salam." We did our bank business, and afterwards she said to me, "How did you know how to say that?"

And I said, "I have had the honor of studying Islam, and I see its great beauty. I see God through Islam. She said, "Wow." I replied, "You know, my dream is to start an Abrahamic coalition to stand up against hate aimed especially at the Abrahamic traditions." She said, "You need to speak to our Maulana." What I found out then, when I made a connection with an Islamic Shia community, was that while I was praying to God, "How do I respond to this hate coming out of Florida?" in the mosque, they were praying to God, "How do we get our message out to the wider world about what Islam is?" And God brought us together in a random encounter at a bank.

One story of hope I learned is that when we take one step into another religion or culture to learn something about it, to learn how to respect it and greet it with respect and reverence; and when people in their religions have the courage and strength to show their faith, whether through hijab, wearing a cross, or a kippah; when those things come together, God works miracles.

The coalition started because I knew how to greet someone, and she had the courage or had chosen, to wear her faith publicly. Now, 16 years later, we run activities annually. We are all volunteers, and we offer programs for adults, families, and kids. In particular, I am very proud of what we call our Interfaith Middle School Peace Camp, where we bring together 11- and 12-year-olds, 40 to 50 at a time, with high school and college students. They teach each other about the beauty of their faith, and then we practice standing up against hate. At the end of the two days, we visit a synagogue, a mosque, a church, and later the Baha'i Temple in Chicago. These young people have been my stories of hope. I have seen them grow into interfaith leaders.

A quick story that always cracks me up is about a young Irish Catholic girl who was involved in our high school program. During the holiday season, she was working at a department store. She was as Irish as Waterford Crystal. She helped someone buy something, and the woman said, "Thank you very much. Merry Christmas." "I don't say 'Happy Holidays.' I say, 'Merry Christmas.'" Annie, who is as Irish Catholic as can be, looked at her and said, "Oh, I say, 'Happy Holidays' because I'm Jewish." The woman said, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for offending you."

Those moments, when young people stand up in the moment to speak gently and respectfully against hate and challenge it, give me hope. Hundreds of young people have gone to our peace camps, and I hear tons of stories about them challenging their peers, whether in person or on social media. Finally, my last story of hope is Viator House of Hospitality, the home for young men seeking asylum that my order helped fund and I helped start, is now 10 years old. It has been a home started by a Catholic organization for young men alone in our country who escaped violence and came here seeking refuge. I am very conscious about each young man practicing the faith of his choice. There is a Quran and prayer rug in the rooms of our young men who are Muslim. There is a ride to the Hindu temple waiting. There is a ride to Juma. There is a ride to church or a Bible. Because of God's blessings upon me and exposing me to the beauty of all traditions, I am able to welcome young men of all traditions and provide them with a home where they feel not only safe, but respected and revered in their tradition.

Because of that, 26 mosques, churches, and synagogues partner with us. Talk about a story of hope in this time when immigrants are under assault in our nation: 26 communities of faith joining together to embrace young men on their journey to safety, a journey that God, in all our traditions, says must be embraced. What keeps me going is seeing these stories of hope: the young woman who challenges hate at this department store; the young Hindu from Bangladesh in our program who taught his young Bangladeshi Muslim brother in our home to cook so he could get up and have Sahur during

Ramadan; the people who find refugees and asylum seekers and stand up for them, bringing the best of their faith traditions; and the young people who grow up to be interfaith leaders and take that message out to the world.

Hon. Nikos Chrysogelos, Deputy Mayor of Athens for Climate Governance and Social Economy, Former MEP, Activist - Greece

Keynote Remarks

Honorable Nikos Chrysogelos is the Deputy Mayor of Athens for Climate Governance and Social Economy and President of the Reception and Solidarity Center. He oversees Athens' climate planning and implementation of the Climate Contract under the EU's "100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030" initiative. A former Member of the European Parliament, he served as Vice-Chairman of the Regional Development Committee. Throughout his career, Mr. Chrysogelos has founded numerous citizen initiatives and civil society organizations. A certified trainer on environmental issues, he has managed and consulted on European projects focused on sustainability, environmental protection, and social issues. His work focuses on environmental sustainability, social equity, and innovative approaches to climate and urban development.



As we gather on the sidelines of the 81st Session of the United Nations General Assembly, there are world leaders debating treaties, agreements, policies, and microeconomics around us. But in this room, we represent the heartbeat of global progress: civil society, grassroots groups, faith leaders, and the next generation. We can improve the treaties, the agreements, and the official meetings. But what is missing is commitment and a way to implement them. For example, governments sign the Paris Climate Agreement or the Sustainable Development Goals, but the question is: did they follow through on their commitments? So, our theme today is both a declaration and a roadmap for building bridges for a sustainable, inclusive future and climate action, a key to a sustainable and inclusive future without leaving anyone behind, and to fair climate action for the benefit of the climate, society, and all of us.

We are living through a challenging era of human history. The challenges we face, from catastrophic climate impacts and collapse, and rising social inequity, to threats against democratic resilience, peace, and a society of care, do not respect national borders. These problems cannot be solved by any single nation, sector, or social group. They cannot be corrected without collaboration and citizen engagement.

The role of social institutions is crucial. The crises are interconnected, and therefore our solutions must be collaborative and coherent to move forward. We must build bridges where others build walls. We have to work for hope, unity, and solutions when others promote hate, exclusion, and division.

This is a very important moment in the history of our societies. When we talk about climate action, we often focus on energy models, technological innovations, or carbon markets. But these are only tools. The most important thing is effective and fair climate governance: sharing the benefits with society, bringing everyone on board, and using climate action not only as a tool for the climate and environment, but also as a core policy for social and climate justice. People care when they feel there is justice in our climate action. Through climate action, we can also address deep social problems and close social gaps. Otherwise, the discussion relates only to part of society. We want to include everyone. This is fundamentally a crucial exercise in human collaboration.

Without collaboration, we cannot tackle the climate crisis or promote climate justice. It requires a robust social economy where human well-being and environmental health are valued over short-term profits. It requires a revitalization of democratic and participatory governance, where people feel they can influence decision-making. This is crucial because people feel excluded, but they also have rights to shape their future, a sustainable, inclusive, and fair future. True sustainability cannot be achieved in a vacuum or through a top-down approach alone. It requires a deliberate, multistakeholder approach that reshapes the relationship among policies, citizens, and cities.

In Greek, "polis" and "polites" meaning the citizens, are keywords for democracy. We must bridge the wisdom of our previous cultures, the best traditions and knowledge of all civilizations, with modern technology and scientific knowledge. It is not only about innovation and new knowledge; we must also think about the wisdom of all civilizations. Of course, there are stereotypes, but there is wisdom there, too.

We must reestablish a balanced relationship among societies and nature, not only among societies, but also between societies and nature, drawing on innovation and existing experience in sustainable agriculture and energy efficiency. In every culture and society there is wisdom about agriculture, the basics of life, and energy. We were adapted to the environment; we know how to protect it through collaboration with nature. We have forgotten all this, and we have to work on it.

We should bridge the wisdom of older generations and traditions with the enthusiasm, creativity, and energy of our youth. We could bridge the institutional and administrative power of local governments with the moral clarity and commitment of civil society. Leadership brings bottom-up and top-down initiatives into politics and daily life. But for this, we also need freedom of expression, a free press, and journalists and writers dedicated to peace and collaboration.

Local governments are, or could be, on the front lines of sustainable urban development, climate mitigation, and adaptation. Athens, for example, participates in the EU mission of 112 cities for climate neutrality, Net Zero Cities, and is now among the coordinators of a flagship initiative by the United Nations Environment Programme's Mediterranean Action Plan to create a Mediterranean network of climate-neutral cities.

I think the Mediterranean offers a good example of how countries, religions, and societies can collaborate while setting aside their differences, because there is a common strategy. Although sometimes we cannot see the implementation, we can see the signatures of all the governments on the agreements. Cities see firsthand how a flooded street or an extreme heat wave impacts a community. We realize the cost in human lives and in the economy, and prevention benefits our societies and costs less. It is better to invest in mitigation and adaptation than to pay later the high cost of inaction. Local authorities need the energy, trust, and innovative solutions that only civil society and diverse community stakeholders can provide.

When we create open spaces for cross-sector dialogue, not only about green zones or cycling, we unlock new pathways for creativity, democratic participation, understanding one another, social cohesion, human rights, respect, and sustainable development. This brings us to the first critical pillar of our discussion during these three days of action: "From Common Ground to the Common Good: Faith Communities Working Together." Faith traditions serve as a moral anchor for billions of people in the fight for environmental justice. Faith communities are not passive observers; they are vital catalysts. Although some groups try to misuse faith traditions to promote hate, division, exclusion, and racism, the core values of compassion, justice, solidarity, peace, and respect for creation and all creatures are basic principles of the world's religions.

Interfaith dialogue allows us to look past theological differences and identify shared values and common action for sustainability, democracy, inclusiveness, peace, human rights, and climate action. When faith communities unite, they move beyond merely finding common ground. They actively build a common future. This is very important. It is not only the ground for common action, but also the goal of a common future. They mobilize citizens, manage community resources and hold leaders accountable to moral standards. This is very important in a cynical era.

By connecting religious values with climate action and social equity, faith communities can provide the ethical framework needed to sustain long-term global efforts. While grounding our efforts in timeless values that are important for our times, we must also look toward the horizons of tomorrow. We cannot decide about the future without the participation of the generations who will live it.

This is why it is very important that, during the second roundtable "Global Youth Voices on AI, Democracy, and Human-Rights-Based Digitalization" young leaders are not just the leaders of tomorrow.

They can be the vital changemakers of today. They are citizens today, not only citizens of the future. We often hear that the young generation is the future, but young people live now. Even small children and babies are here, and they suffer the problems we face today. This is why it is very important that the young generation take the floor and act together to shape today and the future in a way that is fairer, more sustainable, inclusive, and climate safe.

One of our best examples is that, while preparing our climate plan and climate contract, we included young people in the discussion. But even more importantly, we gave them tools to implement their ideas: small grants, with support from Bloomberg Philanthropies. We give grants of €1,000 to €4,000 to implement climate-action projects. It is not only about making demands or taking the floor. Most importantly, it is about how young people can implement their dreams and proposals, how they can act and not wait for someone else to do the job. So, we must not forget the younger generation.

We are now witnessing a technological revolution driven by artificial intelligence. Digital tools have the power to accelerate our progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. But if left unregulated, algorithmic bias, mass surveillance, and digital misinformation can erode democratic resilience and violate fundamental human rights. We already know that AI and technological revolutions are not used only for good, but also for bad, to start wars and make them more destructive and inhuman. It is not just weapons; it is also weapons using AI. Our youth understand this balance deeply. They are pioneering grassroots perspectives and best practices to ensure that digitalization is human-rights-based and also under society's control. We must listen to young people and their voices, incorporate their insights into global policy, and ensure that our digital future protects human dignity, the environment, and social cohesion.

Through these three days of action, we are doing more than expressing and exchanging ideas. We are fostering cross-cultural partnerships and strengthening international collaboration. We can enhance our network and make the bridges we have built more stable and results oriented. The bridges we build here must be strong enough to carry the weight of our shared future. They must connect global policies with local realities, and technology-driven innovation with enduring human values and the wisdom of previous civilizations.

We are here because we refuse to accept a future defined by hate, division, degradation, and despair. We are here because we believe that a sustainable, climate-friendly, equitable, and democratic world is possible if we choose to build it together, with respect for one another and the belief that we can do it together. We can live better, leaving no one behind. Let us step forward in these roundtables with courage, empathy, and a shared commitment to action.


SDGs ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION 2026
SDGs ROUNDTABLE20 DISCUSSION26
ROUND 2
GLOBAL YOUTH VOICES ON AI, DEMOCRACY, AND HUMAN-RIGHTS BASED DIGITALIZATION


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ROUND 2



ROUND 1: FROM COMMON GROUND TO THE COMMON GOOD: FAITH COMMUNITIES WORKING TOGETHER

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Assoc. Prof. Dr. Genti Kruja, President, Religions for Peace Europe - Albania

Moderator Remarks

Prof. Dr. Genti Kruja is professor of Sociology of Religion, Intercultural Communication & Interreligious. Since 2018 he is the Secretary General of the Inter-Religious Council of Albania. Prof. Kruja was also elected in 2021 as member of the European Union External Action Service "Global Exchange on Religion in Society". In 2025, he was reappointed for a second term as an Expert on Freedom of Religion or Belief with the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. In 2024 he was elected President of European National Interreligious Bodies in Religions for Peace Europe and in 2025, he was elected as President of Religions for Peace Europe. He is author of a lot of research papers and book chapters published by leading publishing houses as well as author of two books "Albanians Facing the Challenges of Interfaith Understanding" and "History of Interfaith Dialogue".



Roundtable 1 is entitled "From Common Ground to the Common Good: Faith Communities Working Together" and it contains an important message. We may come from different religious traditions, cultures, countries, and experiences. Yet our differences do not prevent us from identifying areas of common ground and, more importantly, from transforming that common ground into the common good.

The SDG Roundtable Discussion creates a platform for interfaith leaders, civil society representatives, academics, experts, and practitioners to exchange ideas and explore inclusive solutions to social, economic, and environmental challenges. This is particularly relevant because sustainable peace and sustainable development cannot be achieved by institutions alone. They require communities. They require trust. They require dialogue. And they require people who are willing to work together despite their differences.

In today's increasingly interconnected world, faith communities have an important role to play in strengthening social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. Interfaith dialogue is not simply about bringing people together to speak about religion and its beliefs. It's about creating relationships of trust, understanding one another, recognizing our shared responsibilities, and translating shared values into concrete action.

SDGs Roundtable Discussion 2026 identifies several important areas: empowering marginalized voices, increasing women's participation in interfaith leadership, nurturing the next generation of interfaith leaders, and exploring how technology and artificial intelligence can support dialogue and cooperation.

Dr. Luigi De Salvia, President, Religions for Peace Italy - Italy
Panelist: Empowering Marginalized Voices and Faith Communities

Dr. Luigi De Salvia graduated in Medicine and Surgery, specialized in Ophthalmology, and earned a diploma in Theological Culture in 2002. Active in interreligious dialogue since 2003, Dr. Luigi De Salvia was elected General Secretary of the Italian section of Religions for Peace in 2007. Since 2010, he has also contributed to a project supporting religious and cultural inclusion in healthcare facilities and coordinated the conference "Religions, Cultures, and Human Rights: A Complex Relationship in Evolution" at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome. Since 2011, Dr. De Salvia has taught in the Master's Program in Cultural and Religious Mediation at the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome. He was elected President of Religions for Peace Italy in 2016 and President of Religions for Peace Europe in 2018. From 2022 to 2024, he also served as President of the European National Interreligious Bodies.



Convention of the SDGs Roundtable Discussion is important because, in these times of war, it is critical to continue speaking of hope and commitment, and to make a concrete contribution to building peace. The framework of this gathering is Sustainable Development Goals, with the subtitle "Transforming Our World." I understand transforming our world as taking care of our world, not changing it. Transforming suffering into healing, desperation into hope, and conflict into reconciliation.

As people and communities of faith, can we make a real contribution to this goal, which I would say is the most important goal of the SDGs: overcoming the situation of these tremendous wars at the global level? The answer is, yes. Based on our experience of working together for so many years, I believe that if we, as people of faith, express our identities openly, welcoming others rather than keeping them closed within ourselves or using them as a weapon against others, we can make a valuable contribution. We can show that people from different backgrounds can work together for the common good.

Yesterday, the Golden Rule was mentioned. This is important because, in Leviticus 19 and in other traditions, we find this principle: be attentive to the good of others as you are attentive to your own good. We cannot separate the sustainability of our own lives from the sustainability of others' lives. On this basis, we can appreciate and foster human dignity and the value of the dignity of differences. In this way, we can help change relations between religions. In past centuries, the prevailing attitudes were suspicion, hostility, and suppression. In a way, we are fortunate because these relationships have changed over the last 50 years and more. We should be grateful to the courageous and generous pioneers of interreligious dialogue and cooperation through concrete projects.

Last year, we remembered Nostra Aetate, the declaration of the Catholic Church. When I was a child, I could not imagine that the Catholic Church I was born into could change in this way. This change was also prompted by the suffering of Jules Isaac, a Jewish professor who suffered in the Holocaust with his family. He encouraged Pope John XXIII to consider whether it would be possible to change these relations. This led to the opening of the Catholic Church, a very important religious institution worldwide, to changing its relationship with other traditions. This year, we are also remembering the 40th anniversary of the Spirit of Assisi, when the Pope met with leaders from all traditions. These were important steps that encouraged ordinary people like us to work together, respect our differences, and act on the basis of the Golden Rule and human dignity.

Rabbi Hilly Haber, Director of Social Justice Organizing and Education, Central Synagogue - USA
Panelist: Building Inclusive Communities and Welcoming Refugees

As Director of Social Justice Organizing and Education since 2019, Rabbi Hilly Haber, PhD, oversees the justice and volunteer initiatives at Central Synagogue in partnership with the Central in Action Leadership Team. Areas of service include Criminal Legal Reform and Re-Entry, Refugee Resettlement and support for asylum seekers, food insecurity, and climate justice. Ordained at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Rabbi Haber was a Wexner Graduate Fellow and a Tisch Fellow. Rabbi Haber earned a bachelor's degree from Mount Holyoke College, a master's in theological studies from Harvard Divinity School, and in 2025 she completed a PhD in Social Ethics from Union Theological Seminary.



As the Director of Social Justice Organizing and Education at the Central, I would like to inform you about the theological underpinning of our work. I will start by sharing a little bit of Torah. There is a beautiful midrash about the time the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. If you remember, the Israelites fled from Egypt, and with them it was not just the Israelites who were enslaved by Pharaoh, but also Egyptians. People from all over the empire came and fled with them because they wanted something different. We read about an Erev Rav, a mixed multitude that came up out of Egypt together, looking for something different.

As they wandered, they followed a pillar of smoke or a pillar of fire that guided them through the wilderness. Our sages tell us this was the presence of God, leading them through the wilderness. The same sages ask, "Why would God accompany the Israelites in this way? This seems like a menial task for the creator of the world, a God who encompasses everything, who is everywhere. Why would God choose to be there with them?"

Our sages answer in this beautiful midrash, this beautiful explanation: they liken God's presence to a king who has sat all day at court and, at the end of a long day, chooses to guide his children home by torchlight. When his advisers say, "You don't have to do that. There is someone else who can do that for you," the king says, "I do this to impress upon you the love I have for my children." And so, it is with God. God guided us through the wilderness.

God is with us in these moments of exile, when we are seeking refuge and building sanctuary together. God is with us through love. It is God's love that moves God to walk with us in these moments. I love to think about that community in the presence of God: a diverse community that had to decide together how to build community, take care of each other, and survive as they imagined something different from the Egyptian Empire, from the land of Pharaoh.

That is the theology that undergirds so much of our work at Central and in the Jewish community. We think about the love God has for us and how we can be conduits and representatives of that love to anyone walking through the wilderness, and how we can walk together to build spaces of dignity and places of sanctuary.

We work with people from all over the world who are seeking asylum and refuge here in New York City. We do that work with interfaith partners, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian people from all over the city. Together, we lobby and work with local and state governments to ensure that people in the city's care and custody, including those in shelters, have everything they need: clothing, food, and pathways to employment and housing. We work directly with families and have welcomed them into our nursery school. We have families from Guinea, Venezuela, Iran, and elsewhere learning alongside our children and finding a new home and safety here in New York City. As you know, this is a very perilous time in our country and our city, especially for people seeking asylum. We try to create spaces of safety, dignity, and resources where we can walk together through the wilderness and figure out how best to care for one another.

I would like to share an experience I had recently. We engage in Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scriptural reasoning. It is a practice of coming together over sacred texts. We read texts from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran. They are usually centered around a certain value, and then we discuss them together. Each of us has an opportunity to be both guest and host in one another's texts. It is a way of getting to know each other through sacred texts and shared values. These are groups that come together without necessarily sharing political beliefs. There's no litmus test for belonging. We just come together to build bridges through text.

I had an experience sitting with a scholar and peacebuilder from Sierra Leone. His name is Melvin, and he is a Muslim. He was amazing. We had studied together for a few sessions, so we had built a little trust and a little relationship. He said to me last year, "There are so many in my community who have come to New York City seeking safety. They are fleeing war and persecution, and they have gotten here and feel alone. ICE is at our doorstep, no one is helping us, and we are alone."

I heard the pain of his community, and it built a bridge for me through an expression of lament. I think one thing faith communities can do together is build hope and peace but also find theological pathways to building bridges.

No matter how we are feeling politically, there is so much pain in so many ways. An expression of lament, being able to come together through shared pain, can sometimes help us find our way to a shared future. We have been working together since that moment to strengthen not just his community and mine, but how our two communities can work together to build that shared future.

I want to share one more thing as we think about what that shared future could look like. Peace has to be renewed in every generation; it is a practice. So how do we build that? I think it is not necessarily about destroying what currently exists, but about imagining new structures that render the old ones obsolete. That is how I try to approach it, though it's a beautiful question and always a challenge.

Maria Crespo, Director of Growth, Learning and Impact, United Religions Initiative - Argentina

Panelist: Fostering the Next Generation of Interfaith Leaders

María Crespo has served in various roles at URI since 1997, including as a volunteer, Interim Global Council member, Latin America Regional Coordinator, and Membership Support staff member. Based in Buenos Aires, Argentina, she currently serves as URI's Director of Growth, Learning and Impact. Active in the Roman Catholic Church in Argentina, María has contributed to the formation of children, parents, and educators for many years. She is a Lay Collaborator of the Episcopal Commission on Ecumenism and Interreligious Relations and a Professor of Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue at seminaries in Buenos Aires Province. She also belongs to the Global Women's Network for Interreligious Encounter and participates in the Women, Faith and Climate Network. In April 2026, she was recognized as an Official Ambassador of the Signs of Peace Award in Italy.



I am here as Maria, yet I am part of different communities. Foremost, I am Argentinian, so I bring my people to this call. I am also part of the United Religions Initiative, which has 1,300 Cooperation Circles. This means grassroots people doing things for the good of their communities in 120 countries. I come here also as a Roman Catholic. I represent a community whose faith is deeply rooted in my heart and is open to other faiths as well.

You may wonder, "Maria is not a young person, so why is she here talking about fostering and empowering young people?" I come here with the young people who belong to the United Religions Initiative and, beyond that, are working for a better world. There are so many of them, and sometimes they are not heard. At URI, we have a principle that says we are here to bring forward voices that are not often heard. Unfortunately, the voices of young people are sometimes ignored. So here I am, standing up for them. Hopefully, they will be here next year, and I will be applauding the great work they are doing.

Dr. Luigi De Salvia mentioned Nostra Aetate, a document that has moved us Roman Catholics toward interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Of course, it had a great impact on my generation. But when we talk about Nostra Aetate, declarations in the Roman Catholic Church are named by their first two words, it means "in our time" or "in our era." So, the question I bring to you all is: What is needed in this time?

We cannot talk about sustainability if we are not involving and engaging young people, listening to them, allowing their creativity, and even adapting to what they bring, which might not be what we are used to. I come here with examples of that. The Center for Alba in Argentina, based in Buenos Aires but working across the country. There, young men and women stand strong in a community that is majority Christian, with some challenges even within their own community, while being present in interfaith work. So here I am with Samira, who is doing a lot. Though she is young and part of a community that is not always respected, she does interfaith work because she believes in it.

I am also here with Wanda, Sarah, and Samira Leila, amazing youth staff who are not just here for the picture or just doing social media. They are leaders. Sarah is the learning lead, working with many young and not-so-young people around the globe, teaching them to interrupt violence, which we think is very important, and to consider how we restore the Earth and make our lives sustainable. We need young people on board, and URI has chosen to have many of its staff working hard for change.

URI also has a Global Council. You can imagine that global councils usually consist of experts who bring their wisdom and skills. But at URI, skills and capacity are not found only among older people. Young people have experienced war around the world. They see how the earth is being degraded, and they stand for peace, justice, and healing. On URI's Global Council, we have Isaac, Daniel, and Fina: young people who are deeply committed and working as volunteers to help URI become a go-to organization and a game changer.

The question I bring to all of us is: What would a city look like if we allowed young people to share their voices? What would this global community look like if we included, engaged, and brought young people into spaces of change, leadership, and cooperation? One is vibrancy. If we include young people as multipliers, things will reach beyond physical limits because we know they are active on social media. We need multipliers, young people who love traveling, engaging with others, and giving dignity to their peers.

At URI, we believe in a strategic framework focused on the growth and vitality of the network. We talk about the starfish as a model because we do not want a highly centralized office based in San Francisco. We want a URI that is global and able to create starfish. A starfish can grow new legs; we want URI to be everywhere. So, I invite everyone to join URI because we want to grow centers of respect for diversity everywhere. A vibrant community is not one hub; it is as many people as possible multiplying our impact.

It is vital that we ask questions. I have been challenged by young people's questions throughout my 25 years with URI. So, let's be humble and allow young people to question us: Is this the right way to do things? Can we change? Can we adapt? Among URI's principles, there is one norm that I love: Principle 19 says that as an organization, we are constantly learning and adapting. We cannot remain the organization that was built in 2000. We created our preamble, purpose, and principles through facts. Things have changed, so the organization needs to change. That is why we need young people to tell us how. They challenge us with questions, and we have to adapt.

I said vibrant and vital. The last "V" I want to bring here is visible. Organizations doing good in the world cannot be visible if they don't include young people. They are great communicators. Violence makes a lot of noise, but peace does not always. Sometimes we think peace is nice, naive, and beautiful: we sit together for a lovely picture. We have to build peace, and we can only build peace if we are able to interrupt violence. At URI, one of our areas of focus is violence interruption. Sometimes I do not have the strength to interrupt violence, but my young colleagues are courageous and curious, and they are able to do it. So, I count on them.

If we want a vibrant, vital, visible world, let's count on young people. Let's invite them to join us. Let's give them the leadership they deserve.

Dr. David K. Trimble, President, Religious Freedom Institute - USA

Panelist: Advancing International Religious Freedom in Coordination with Global Partner Organizations

David Trimble serves as President of the Religious Freedom Institute, following his leadership of its public policy work and national and international education initiatives. He is widely recognized for advocating on behalf of ethnic and religious minorities and has helped shape key U.S. declarations and legislation concerning genocide, international religious freedom, and the recovery of minority communities in the Middle East. He has also advised leaders in East Africa on democratic reform and human rights protections. Since 2021, Trimble has delivered keynote lectures across Europe and the Middle East, co-developed religious freedom education programs for secondary schools in Poland and the Visegrád Four and trained parliamentary staff and legal counsel in Iraq. He has launched student training programs in the United States and the United Kingdom and conducted religious freedom training for religious leaders on behalf of the U.S. Department of State. Trimble holds a Juris Doctor from Texas A&M University School of Law, a Master of Divinity from Southwestern Seminary, and a Bachelor of Arts from Campbellsville University.



Greetings from the Religious Freedom Institute in Washington, D.C. We are a nonprofit based in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood, four blocks from the White House and two blocks from the Department of State. Sometimes there's more fog in the neighborhood than at other times. I am most encouraged today by the involvement of youth and the comments from my esteemed panelists regarding their programs focused on youth as well. Since COVID, our organization has provided training to approximately 6,700 young people from about 25 different countries. We are very focused on listening to young people today, learning from them, and helping them grow into places of leadership and statesmanship across America and around the world.

We are dedicated to defending religious freedom for all, both in the United States and around the world. We do this by educating current and future leaders about the God-given right to practice religion freely, and by advocating for this fundamental freedom in law and culture. Together, we should ask the probing question: What will it take to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals by 2030? What will it require from the UN General Assembly, and what will it require from us collectively? We should confront ourselves with that question: What will it require from us collectively to achieve the UN 2030 Agenda?

A quick survey of the SDGs reveals that religion and religious freedom do not figure prominently in the current calculus of defining Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs advance commendable, noble aspirations: stability, social change, equity and fairness, social cohesion, economic prosperity, the eradication of poverty, and many other laudable goals that we should strive to achieve. But I think it is fair and accurate to say that religion and religious freedom do not figure prominently in the current global calculus of defining sustainable development. I want to suggest that this calculus is mistaken, and that empirical evidence affirms that when religion is deeply embedded in society, and religious freedom is allowed to flourish in law and culture, many of the 17 SDGs become more achievable around the world.

At RFI, we have a saying: "Religious freedom is important because religion is important." Religious freedom is important because religion is important. Religion is not intended to be marginalized, set aside, or minimized. It is important to everything we desire to attain through the SDGs. If we understand this fundamental observation and the importance of religious freedom for the SDGs, we must first understand what religious freedom is and what it is not. As I travel internationally and meet with parliamentarians, leaders from other countries, and academics, the first challenge I encounter is defining religious freedom. What does it really mean?

First, what it is not: Religious freedom does not mean that all truth claims are valid. Second, it does not mean that all truth claims are equal. Both ideas would be presumptuous. What religious freedom does mean is that every man, woman, boy, and girl has the right to seek ultimate meaning and truth in a transcendent reality, and then to live according to that truth.

What is it about this definition that enables religious freedom to make a necessary and distinct contribution to achieving the UN 2030 Agenda?

Foremost, eligious freedom does not merely protect sincerely held beliefs. Our sincerity matters, but we do not revere our religious convictions merely because they are ours or because they are sincere. Rather, we revere them because we believe they properly orient us toward our Creator, one another, and the nature of reality. Isn't that what the Sustainable Development Goals are about: a proper understanding of reality and of our relationships with one another and our Creator? This is why religious freedom encompasses both a fundamental human right and an essential human responsibility: to pursue ultimate questions and submit us to what and whom we find in that pursuit. Herein lies an important connection between religion and many of the SDGs. As we exercise the fundamental right of religious freedom and seek to understand ultimate truth and meaning, the convictions we form individually and in community properly orient us toward our Creator, one another, and the nature of reality.

Second, religious freedom is a capacious human right. It is roomy; it is large. It is not isolated, nor does it isolate. Think of the commercial holiday of Christmas and the image of Santa with his big bag of toys slung over his shoulder. He has a capacious bag from which he selects toys for particular households. It's a capacious bag.



Religious freedom is distinctive from other human rights because it is capacious. Hear me for a moment: it is capacious because it strengthens other fundamental human rights, the right to expression, the right to peaceful assembly, and the right to a free press. It walks alongside and strengthens those other bedrock human rights. It is also capacious because it contributes to a host of societal goods. Empirical studies show that in nations where religious freedom flourishes, you find stronger equality between men and women, better education, stronger health care, and greater care for the aged and the dying. The basic building blocks of society are much stronger in nations where religious freedom flourishes.

Religious freedom is a capacious human right that contributes to a host of societal goods. When we allow it to flourish, we unleash the power of religion in society for good. If poverty eradication is the greatest global challenge, as SDG 1 states, then we must not omit the power of religion as a social good in addressing that problem. To end hunger and malnutrition, achieve global food security, and promote sustainable agriculture by 2030, SDG 2, we must allow religious freedom to become a catalyst for addressing these challenges, not at the margins but at the center of our pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals.

I spent significant time in northern Iraq in the aftermath of the ISIS genocide, from 2014 to 2017. What was ISIS's first action when it invaded from Syria and rolled into northern Iraq? Its aim was to eradicate communities of faith, an outright genocide. But what was its first act? It burned the crops, striking at the people's source of food. It destroyed schools, the fabric of society and a building block that brings stability and sustainability to a community and nation.

These actions by ISIS were not haphazard. They were well planned. ISIS knew exactly what it was doing and had a clearly defined strategy: attack food supplies, create poverty, destroy jobs and schools, uproot families, and attack the fundamental religious components of society. ISIS had even identified routes to extract young girls, who were taken captive and forced into slavery and marriage. These plans were made before ISIS ever set foot in northern Iraq.

My point is simple: If we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we must understand those who undermine stability and suppress religion in society. ISIS's goal was genocide, but it destabilized society to accomplish that goal. If our goal is religious freedom, pluralism, and peace, then we must rebuild society through agriculture and address poverty, food insecurity, peace, equality, and justice. These are pathways to the SDGs that involve religious freedom.

To the young people here and to all of us collectively: We have a part to play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals together. Let's move religion back to the center of the equation and make it part of the solution.


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ROUND 2: GLOBAL YOUTH VOICES ON AI, DEMOCRACY, AND HUMAN-RIGHTS BASED DIGITALIZATION

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Mehmet Selim Tosun, BA in Finance and Accounting, University of Memphis, USA

Moderator Remarks

Mehmet Selim Tosun is an undergraduate student double-majoring in Finance and Accounting with a minor in Religious Studies at the University of Memphis. Selim is deeply involved in student-led asset management and campus leadership, serving as a Portfolio Manager for the university's student-run investment fund and as Vice President of the Fogelman Finance Club, where he leads weekly market analysis and investment discussions. Alongside his analytical pursuits, he thrives on volunteer work and community service, regularly dedicating his time to tutoring peers in economics, finance, and accounting courses in his college, and supporting local community initiatives.

Having lived across five countries and speaking three languages—English, Turkish, and Urdu—Selim brings an adaptable, cross-cultural perspective to every environment. By integrating financial discipline with insights from religious studies and active service, he aims to build a global career focused on collaborating with teams from diverse cultural backgrounds and navigating international markets.



We must fundamentally understand and embrace the importance of youth within our community. The reality that we are the next generation, the upcoming stewards who will inevitably manage and lead this world. Because we are assigned this monumental task, the transition of responsibility must begin now. The most critical component we must establish among ourselves, especially at this early stage, is trust. I stand firmly by the principle that trust is our most valuable currency. As future leaders, we must learn to use it wisely, investing it in relationships that foster mutual growth, respect, and long-term collaboration.

To cultivate this trust and truly prepare for the challenges ahead, youth must be actively encouraged to step up, participate in community events, and engage in early decision-making processes. This active participation must be fiercely advocated, particularly when it comes to humanitarian activities. Early involvement in these efforts allows young people to witness firsthand the varied and complex struggles that different societies face. This vital exposure grounds us; it cultivates empathy and helps us set meaningful, impact-driven goals early in our careers. When we understand the genuine struggles of others, we are far better equipped to design a future that is equitable and just.

As we step into these emerging leadership roles, we also have to navigate the unique technological landscape we are inheriting. We are living at the dawn of a new age of Artificial Intelligence, and our generation is the one most exposed to its rapid evolution. Because of this, comprehensive education regarding AI should become mandatory rather than optional. We cannot afford to be passive consumers of this technology. Instead, we need the foundational knowledge and ethical frameworks to harness its capabilities, using it to our absolute advantage to solve the complex global issues we discussed today.

Today, unverified information and false narratives spread among young people faster than we could have ever imagined. A single individual holding a smartphone camera and posting a short video on social media can reach an audience of millions in mere minutes. Yet, out of those massive crowds consuming the content, very few take the time to verify the facts being presented. Therefore, the standards for news verifiability and digital literacy must be championed far more rigorously. We must be the generation that stops the cycle of misinformation by demanding truth and context.

Lastly, we must constantly encourage ourselves and those around us to build an environment rooted in open dialogue and the true freedom of speech. Let us constantly remind ourselves that it is our duty to initiate the conversations that build bridges, even when it is difficult. And let us never forget the profound truth that a winner is simply another loser who decided to try one more time. As we take these insights into the real world, how will you take that critical first step today to build the trust our community so desperately needs?

Ana Ursachi, International Human Rights Attorney, Peace and Justice Platform Brussels, Belgium
Panelist: AI Governance, Human Rights, and Democratic Accountability

Ana Ursachi is an international human rights lawyer with over two decades of experience in criminal defense and cross border advocacy. A member of the Moldovan Bar Association since 2000, she practiced as a criminal defense attorney until 2016. Her work now focuses on arbitrary detention, judicial independence, politically motivated prosecutions, and safeguards against the misuse of international legal mechanisms. Based in Brussels, Ursachi engages with United Nations human rights mechanisms, the European Parliament, and the Council of Europe on human rights, democratic standards, and the rule of law. She has been a member of the Peace and Justice Platform Brussels since 2019 and its Vice President since 2024. She also serves as Vice President of the Platform for Peace and Justice Human Rights Foundation, contributing to cross border initiatives and international legal dialogue.



I address to the SDGs Conference 2026 from Brussels, a city where laws on technology are written, debated, and negotiated every day. I would like to begin with a personal anecdote. For 26 years, I have worked as a lawyer. In the last decade, much of that work has been defending people who were targeted not because of what they did, but because of what they said, wrote, or believed. I have watched the tools of that targeting change. Once, persecution needed informants, paper files, and closed borders. Today, it needs data: a facial recognition camera, a scraped social media profile, an algorithm that flags a journalist as a risk, a database that follows an activist from one country to another. Transnational repression is no longer a rare event. It is becoming a service that technology makes cheaper, faster, and harder to see.

This is why I say clearly that artificial intelligence is not neutral. It carries the values of those who design it, fund it, and deploy it. If those values are secrecy, control, and profit without accountability, AI will deepen every inequality we already have. If those values are dignity, transparency, and the rule of law, AI can become one of the greatest tools for justice humanity has ever built.

Europe has made a choice. With the AI Act, the European Union became the first region to regulate artificial intelligence according to risk and to ban certain uses outright, such as social scoring by public authorities. The Council of Europe went further and opened the first legally binding international treaty on AI, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, open to countries far beyond Europe.

These instruments are not perfect, but they send a message that human rights do not stop at the edge of the screen. Here at the United Nations, the global dialogue on AI governance gives every nation, large or small, a place at the table. That is essential because the rules of the digital future cannot be written by a few companies and a few capitals alone. However, laws are only the beginning. A law that no one knows, no one enforces, and no one can invoke in court is only paper. So, I want to leave you with three requests.

First, demand transparency. When an algorithm decides whether you get a job, a loan, a visa, or a place at university, you have the right to know how and why. Second, demand remedy. Every person harmed by an automated decision must have access to a human being, a lawyer, and a judge. Third, and most important, do not wait for permission. You are the first generation that has never known a world without the internet. You understand these systems better than many of the people regulating them. Write to your parliamentarians. Join civil society. Build technology that protects rather than watches. Your voice is not a future contribution. It is needed now.

Democracy has always depended on people who refuse to stay silent. In the age of artificial intelligence, that has not changed. Only the tools have. Let us make sure those tools serve humanity and never the other way around.

Abdullah Enes Kut, Political Science Student, University of California, Berkeley, USA
Panelist: Shared Human Needs, Civic Participation, and Community Building to Reduce Polarization

Hon. Mike Lake is the Member of Parliament for Leduc-Wetaskiwin and was first elected in 2006. After his re-election in October 2008, he was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, a position he held for seven years. On September 13, 2012, he was sworn into the Queen's Privy Council, after being asked by Prime Minister Stephen Harper to serve on a Cabinet Committee tasked with efforts to balance the federal budget. Hon. Mike Lake has been elected seven straight times and, in both 2019 and 2021, received the highest vote total out of all candidates, from all parties, across the country. In opposition, he has held three Shadow Minister positions: Youth, Sport and Accessibility; International Development; and Mental Health,

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My presentation is inspired by a game that I play with my friends. Some of you might be familiar with it: We're Not Really Strangers. It is a party game where you talk about your biggest fears, your celebrity crush, or a dream you have let go of. Beyond the theatrics of the game, what I find really important is that it allows you to connect at a level that you all mutually share. I do not think anybody in this room does not have a biggest fear, unless you are very brave, and I applaud you for that.

That brings me to another thing that we all share which are needs: Maslow's hierarchy of needs, moving from the bottom of the pyramid to the top, from physiological needs to self-actualization, from the body to the mind. I think there is a lot of merit to be understood and seen in a framework like this because what it fundamentally does is unite us in everything that we are inevitably forced, have the privilege of sharing because of our shared humanity.

You could vote red, blue, pink, or even purple, but food, safety, community, and a sense of purpose, we are all in need of these necessities. Providing them is not a question of whether you agree with me on a certain topic or a multitude of topics. Instead, it is about the fact that you and I are both the children of a woman, and you and I both need the same basic things to be able to live a fulfilling, supported life. You do not get past polarization by arguing people out of their side. Instead, meet them in the middle, at the outskirts of a universally shared need.

We should try to foster common grounds to work together that is as self-interested as it is communal. Do not expect morality to do the heavy lifting. Do not expect morality to allow people sharing different views to come to a table. Instead, appeal to them. You and I have something we both need, and the greatest alliances in history have been born from shared needs.

I have to be honest about why I ended up becoming a legislative intern. It was not for this noble purpose of helping people. I try to do other things for that endeavor. I honestly did not really believe in the power of government until the summer, when I was able to get an internship with Congresswoman Doris Matsui. The reason I applied for the internship was that it looked good on my resume. I really liked the little emblem that the U.S. House of Representatives has. It looks good on LinkedIn. I am being very frank with you here.

But then I went into the work, and I was assigned casework a week in. For anyone who might be unfamiliar, casework basically means receiving calls from constituents who come to you with various problems. Some examples of constituent casework I have resolved include a disability claim that had been stuck for 11 months, a delayed passport application that was risking timely medical treatment, and a single mother who needed housing for her children. Every time I picked up a call and felt that I was speaking to a real person with real problems on the other side, I became more and more shocked, and honestly embarrassed, by how wrong my understanding of government as a structure had been.

I go to UC Berkeley; one of the most radical universities and aanti-institutionalism is a big part of being what you could call, in modern terms, "woke." But I grew to realize that the government, the structures that we have built, that you have built and are now passing on to us, have a lot of merit. They have a lot of power genuinely extending to the people that any grassroots organization might not extend to.

To bring us back to the framework, the government covers physiological and safety needs. We are protected by the government. We are ensured through the police force or Social Security, our basic needs, such as food, shelter, and housing, are met. Is this always the case? Unfortunately, I cannot say so just yet, but it is a start. There is something going on, and I have experienced this firsthand. I urge you, although you might not know me, to trust me because I was in a position of deep distrust in the government. My opinion has frankly changed through experiencing it firsthand.

For this first part of the pyramid, I encourage you to trust, or at the very least understand, the institutions you are part of. You might like it or not, but you have a representative and a senator. You have a mayor and a city council. You can choose to engage with these structures, or you can choose to be absent from them, but the decisions these people make will affect you no matter what side you stand on. The best thing you can do, if the structure is already there, is work toward changing it for your good, for our good.

Community building is the second part, and this is a bit more personal. I recently got a new apartment, and I love decorating. There are posters everywhere: Spider Man, Daredevil, you name it. Something I have really enjoyed doing since getting my own apartment, where my landlady is not constantly nagging about the noise, is inviting friends for a recurring housewarming. Usually, a housewarming is something you do one time and get over with. But sue me. I am just a social person. I love having my friends in my house. We pick a recurring topic of conversation. It can be as simple as astrology, tarot, or modern dating, and sometimes more serious things, like surviving academic pressure.

The gist is that it brings together people from different backgrounds. I have friends who are Chinese, Kenyan, not Muslim, Christian, and from different sexual orientations, racial orientation, and different ethnic backgrounds. We come together and talk about something that pertains to all of them. I think there is a lot of merit in something like that because I personally feel very vulnerable in an environment like that. I do not want to use the word “vulnerability” as a token. I feel stripped of everything I attach to myself as a core identity.

At the end of the day, if I am going through a rough patch and need to get through a midterm, it momentarily stops mattering who I vote for or who I think should be in charge of a specific structure. In that moment, for maybe an hour, the only thing every single person in that classroom, including myself, cares about are getting through that exam the best we can. Creating community building spaces like this reminds you that there are multiple things going on every day in your life and in the lives of others that strip you down to nothing but your humanity.

Lastly, at the very top of the pyramid are esteem and self-actualization. The gain from being a humanitarian, from what we do here and what most of you do, is twofold. For the communities

being served, basic needs are met. When I go out to San Francisco, host a donation drive, and donate clothes I do not wear anymore, I am serving someone else's safety need. I am serving someone else's physiological needs. Or when my organization, Embrace Relief, receives donations from elementary schools in California to host an art auction that raises $5,500, and we donate that amount to St. Jude Children's Hospital, we are taking care of a mother's, a father's, or a child's health and communal needs.

But at the same time, I am taking care of my need to feel that I matter in the world. I want to feel that all the education I have obtained and all the money poured into bringing me here mean something. That is my esteem and self-actualization need. So, humanitarianism is much more complicated than simply helping people. It is also a matter of helping yourself. I will be very frank: I do not think any of you would have been in this room if you did not feel some sort of commitment, responsibility, or maybe even guilt to do something with what you have.

We are not really strangers after all. The secret ingredient I wrote down here, and I will read it shamelessly, is viewing everybody else as just as you. It is not magic. It is getting radically uncomfortable with being confined to arbitrary labels that detract from our shared humanity. Frankly, I could not care less what you put on your back, what you do with your hair or physical appearance, what you do with your life, what you study, what you read, or what you consume. At the end of the day, you and I have a shared responsibility to live in cohesion.

To leave you after this very long train of thought, I would like you to follow the counterfactual. Reducing polarization and fighting difference is a lot less about "I successfully talked A out of believing in B" and a lot more about "I connected with A in a way that has nothing to do with B." If you are lucky, you will eventually connect with A over B. Maybe they will even teach you something, and you will be proven wrong.

Diana Scorpan, Youth Entrepreneur, Freelance Journalist, Administrator, Artemius Service SRL, Moldova

Panelist: The Impact of AI on Democratic Processes and Civic Engagement

Diana Scorpan was born in Chișinău and discovered her passion for public speaking and debating during high school, when she was a student at Orizont. At just 16, she founded an NGO dedicated to promoting debating in schools, successfully implementing national level projects and initiatives. She graduated in 2021 from the University of Groningen with a bachelor's degree in International Relations and Organization. Alongside her academic journey, Diana strengthened her management and entrepreneurial skills by opening and running a horeca business in the Netherlands. In 2023, she returned to Moldova, where she was offered the position of Project Officer at People in Need.



I come from the Republic of Moldova, a small country geographically, but one with a big heart. That is how we came to be known after the way we managed the refugee crisis. It is a small country, but one that has found itself at the intersection of some of the biggest questions facing democracy today, and I would like to address them.

My own path to this stage has not been a conventional one. I started my professional journey in civil society when I founded an NGO in Moldova dedicated to promoting academic debate among high school students. At the time, we thought we were teaching young people how to debate. But looking back, I realize we were doing much more than that. We were teaching them how to question information, how to build an argument, how to disagree without becoming enemies, which is very important nowadays, and how to distinguish evidence from persuasion. We were teaching them how to develop their critical thinking skills, which have become even more important today.

I later moved to the Netherlands, where I studied international relations at the University of Groningen. Somewhat unexpectedly for an international relations student, I also became an entrepreneur. I opened a cleaning company with a very practical social objective: creating employment opportunities for Ukrainian refugee women who wanted to work in the Netherlands but could not because they did not yet speak Dutch or English.

At the same time, I remained involved in some journalism and civic initiatives. One of the projects that shaped me most was Sapere Aude, where we interviewed candidates representing the political forces competing in Moldova's 2021 elections. I learned a lot during that project, especially about how technologies impact, how youth interact with institutions and how youth interact with elections nowadays. I learned that youth nowadays need videos and watch videos, which are shorter, create immediate engagement, rather than long videos in which many political subjects are explained.

I was also involved in the civic movement Teachers Not Terrorists, created after the controversial expulsion of our Turkish teachers from Moldova. My relationship with democracy has always been quite practical. For me, democracy has never meant only elections. It means access to information. It means the ability to question those who seek power. It means independent journalism, and it means citizens who possess the skills necessary to make their own informed decisions.

I returned to Moldova in 2023. After working with People in Need, I went back to entrepreneurship because Moldova is developing very rapidly, and I believe entrepreneurship is another form of contribution to a country's resilience. But I also want to share the Moldova I returned to because I

returned to a country experiencing something else. It was becoming a laboratory for a new type of pressure on democracy. This brings me to AI, the subject of our panel here today: artificial intelligence's impact on democracy.

I believe that sometimes, when we discuss AI's impact on democracy, we begin with the wrong question. We ask, "Can AI manipulate elections?" But I think the more important question is, "What happens when artificial intelligence enters an information ecosystem that is already vulnerable to manipulation?" My country provides a very interesting case study. Over the last electoral cycles, our country has faced extensive foreign information manipulation, coordinated networks and inauthentic social media accounts, political propaganda, and attempts to influence public opinion online. TikTok became particularly important because, for younger generations, political information no longer necessarily arrives through a newspaper, television, or a news website. It arrives between a funny video, a cooking tutorial, and a friend's holiday.

This fundamentally changes political communication. A political message no longer needs to look political. It needs to be emotional, short, and shareable, and most importantly, it needs to satisfy the algorithm. Investigative journalists in Moldova managed to infiltrate some of the influence networks which I talked about. What they documented was remarkable. Real people were being trained to operate multiple social media accounts. They were instructed on how to increase engagement, how to coordinate likes and shares, how to make political messages appear organic, and how to reach audiences beyond their existing networks.

Then AI added another layer. AI tools can now generate text, voices, images, and videos at extraordinary speed and an extremely low cost. This means an influence operation that once needed an entire newsroom can increasingly be conducted in a small room with a laptop. But there is an even deeper problem. AI does not only make misinformation easier to produce. It makes authenticity much harder to recognize.

Democracy depends heavily on our ability to understand who is really speaking to us. Is it a citizen, a journalist, or a politician? Is this a political campaign? Is this even a human being? When these distinctions disappear, trust becomes one of the most important casualties. Social media has unquestionably brought citizens closer to politics, and that can be positive. Politics becomes accessible. Public officials become reachable. Young people can organize campaigns, expose injustice, and mobilize communities faster than any previous generation.

But accessibility is not the same thing as understanding. The algorithm nowadays rewards engagement, and engagement often rewards outrage, fear, conflict, and certainty much more effectively than nuance. A responsible political explanation might require 10 minutes, but a conspiracy theory requires 15 seconds. This creates an extraordinary asymmetry, and AI can multiply that asymmetry at scale.

What should democracies do? I believe there are three main areas where we need to act. First, critical thinking must become democratic infrastructure. The debate clubs I helped create many years ago seem more relevant to me today than they did then. We need an education system that teaches young people not simply what information to consume, but how to interrogate information. Who created this? What evidence supports it? Why am I seeing it? What emotion is it trying to produce in me? What information might be missing?

Second, we need strong, independent journalism. Some of the most important information about foreign influence operations in Moldova did not come from an algorithm or an AI detection system. It came from real people, from journalists willing to spend months infiltrating networks, documenting them, and showing citizens how manipulation actually worked. Courageous human beings still matter enormously. Third, technology companies and social media platforms must accept that democratic resilience cannot be outsourced entirely to individual users. Platforms know far more about coordinated behavior, artificial amplification, and algorithmic distribution than ordinary citizens ever can. Protecting freedom of expression and protecting the integrity of the information environment are both essential democratic objectives. Finding a balance will be difficult, but refusing to address such a problem is a choice, and that choice has consequences.

I remain optimistic because technology itself is not antidemocratic. AI can also make institutions more accessible. It can help journalists analyze enormous datasets. It can translate public information into minority languages. It can help citizens understand legislation. It can lower barriers to education and civic participation. The question, therefore, is not whether AI will participate in democracy, because it already does. The question is what kind of democratic culture we build around it.

I began my career teaching teenagers how to debate. Today, after working in civil society, journalism, and international relations, I find myself returning to the same principle. Artificial intelligence will become faster. Algorithms will become better at understanding us. Synthetic content will become increasingly difficult to distinguish from reality. Our response cannot simply be to build faster detection tools. We must also build more resilient citizens, especially young people, because ultimately, the most important democratic technology is still the human capacity to question, reason, and make an informed choice.

Perhaps the challenge before us is not only to make AI more responsible. It is to make our democracies intelligent enough to live with artificial intelligence because AI, like any other technology, can be a tool or a weapon, and we should use it wisely.

Atdhe Mehmeti, Member, European Interfaith Youth Network, Religions for Peace Europe, Kosovo
Panelist: AI for Social Good, Human Dignity, and Shared Flourishing

Atdhe Mehmeti is a young professional from Kosovo with an academic background in Political Science and interests in international relations, diplomacy, interfaith dialogue, youth engagement, human rights, and civic participation. He holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Prishtina and is pursuing a master's degree in International Relations and Diplomacy. During his studies, he has served as a Political Science student representative, member of the Student Parliament, and Senator at the University of Prishtina. Atdhe is a member of the Youth Faith Network of Religions for Peace Europe, contributing to youth participation and interfaith cooperation, and has served as a facilitator at a meeting of the organization's Presidency Board in Germany. He is also the cofounder of Ktheju Tokës Tënde, a nonprofit organization promoting local economic development and raising awareness about supporting products made in Kosovo.



Artificial intelligence is often discussed as a race for speed and profit. I invite everyone to ask a different question: can AI help people and the planet flourish together? AI becomes a social good only when technical capability is guided by human dignity, justice, inclusion, and shared responsibility. Young people, religious communities, and multireligious cooperation have an important contribution to make. The key is not only what AI can do, but who benefits, who may take the risks, and who is behind. This is about supporting the planet and strengthening peaceful and just societies.

Religious traditions do not provide technical instructions for algorithms. They provide moral guidance about purpose, responsibility, and the use of power. They remind us that what is technically possible is not always morally acceptable. The Quran and the Bible place human dignity at the center. The Quran teaches that the human person is honored by God, entrusted with responsibility on Earth, and called to know others across differences. The Bible teaches that every person bears the image of God, calls us to love our neighbor, and asks us to defend the vulnerable. Together, these sources offer a clear principle: people must never be reduced to data or used merely for efficiency, profit, or control.

AI can help us recognize patterns, manage information, and respond faster. It can support climate forecasting, ecosystem monitoring, and better use of energy and water. In health, it can assist with research, early detection, and access to information. It can also improve accessibility and reveal gaps in public services. Yet potential does not guarantee justice. Even an accurate system can make, when data are biased, communities have no voice, or benefits reach only the privileged.

AI ethics must include care for creation. The Quran speaks about balance in creation, while the Bible presents humanity as responsible for caring for the Earth. These teachings require us to consider the environmental costs of technology itself, including energy, water, electronic waste, and natural resources. AI for climate action is credible only when its own ecological footprint is recognized and reduced.

AI can reproduce historical discrimination through its data and design. Unequal access to connectivity, languages, and digital skills can turn the digital divide into the AI divide. Generative tools can also make misinformation, hatred, and polarization. Every initiative should therefore be tested for fairness, dignity, privacy, transparency, and accountability. It should strengthen human agency and bring communities closer to justice and peace.

Young people should not be invited only to use a completed platform. They should help define the problem, design the intervention, take risks, and explain both its value and limitations. Religious communities can offer trusted spaces for dialogue and service, while universities and experts provide technical mentorship. Projects should begin with a real community need, develop a small, useful solution, test it for bias and safety, and share the lessons transparently.

Religions for Peace does not need to become a technology company. Its distinctive contribution is the human and ethical infrastructure that technology cannot create by itself: trust, moral discernment, dialogue, and access to diverse communities. Through its leadership bodies, youth and women's networks, and national council, Religions for Peace can bring together religious leaders, young people, academics, policymakers, and technical experts.

Religions for Peace Europe can make four practical contributions. It can convene diverse voices before AI enters community life. It can translate insights from sacred texts and religious traditions into accessible principles for responsible AI. It can connect European institutions and technical experts with trusted local communities. It can also strengthen peacebuilding and information literacy by addressing AI enabled misinformation, polarization, and religious hatred.

The European Interfaith Youth Network can turn these principles into youth led practices. It can connect young people across countries and faith traditions to identify community needs. By treating young people as co-designers rather than only users, the youth network can bring their lived experience into AI initiatives, support intergenerational dialogue, and contribute to peace.

Shared Sacred Flourishing offers a positive vision of success. Flourishing means more than individual achievement or economic growth. It includes the wellbeing of people, communities, other living beings, and the Earth in their interconnectedness. For AI, success should be judged by whether innovation allows life to flourish together naturally, socially, spiritually, and morally, while respecting different religious and cultural identities.

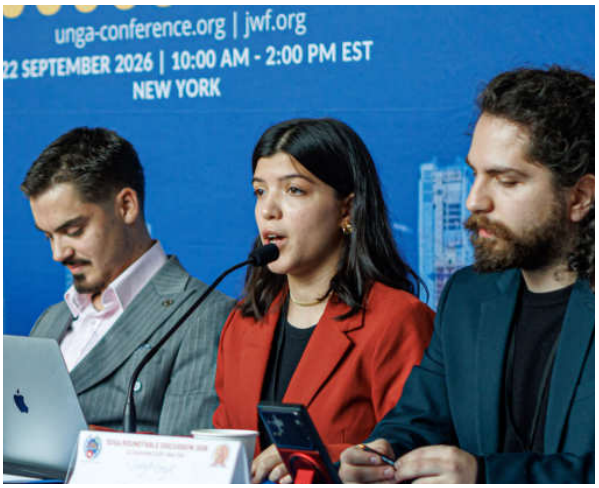
We have eight values for responsible AI: human dignity, interdependence, compassion, justice and inclusion, care for creation, the common good, pluralism, and responsibility toward future generations. Together, these values ask whether AI shares benefits and burdens fairly, listens to excluded communities, respects ecological limits, strengthens peaceful coexistence, and protects the world that today's choices will leave to young people.

A practical next step could be AI for Shared Flourishing Labs. Each national interreligious body could convene a small youth team with a community organization, a university or technical mentor, ethical advisors, or people directly affected by the chosen issue. The team would listen, jointly design a modest intervention, pilot it safely, evaluate its usefulness and fairness, and share lessons. Possible themes include climate resilience, health information, accessibility, inclusion, and responses to harmful misinformation.

AI can expand our ability to respond to climate change, health crises, and inequality, but it cannot decide what a good and just society should be. That requires ethical wisdom, accountability, and the imagination of young people. Our shared task is to combine technical capability, ethical and spiritual wisdom, and youth imagination. Religions for Peace Europe and the youth network can help bring these together through trusted networks and a commitment to the common good. AI should amplify our shared humanity, not automate our divisions.

Sacide Turkmen, Journalism Student, DePaul University, JWF Research Fellow 2026, USA
Panelist: Innovative Approaches to Combat Misinformation and Enhance Media Literacy

Sacide Turkmen is a Journalism student at DePaul University, where she is also pursuing a minor in Screenwriting. She is involved in community service, youth leadership, and dialogue initiatives through Embrace Relief and the MOSAIC Dialogue and Service Club. She has a particular interest in bridgebuilding, polarization, and creating opportunities for dialogue among people from different backgrounds. Through her involvement in research, media, advocacy, and community programs, she continues to explore these interests and learn from different perspectives. Sacide Turkmen hopes to attend law school in the future and pursue a career in human rights law.



I would like to start with a question: When was the last time you checked the source of a news story you read or watched? Let's dive into it; you do not have to be a journalist or a media professional to improve your media literacy. Today, billions of people can publish, repost, or distribute information online within seconds. Media literacy starts with asking the right questions, and to ask the right questions, we need at least a fundamental understanding of media literacy, the ability to access, analyze, create, and act using all forms of communication.

Media literacy is an essential skill for all of us, but we should focus especially on young people. If we educate young people better today, they can carry these skills into the next generation. In the United States, a 2025 Pew Research Center study found that 97% of teens use the Internet every day, and 40% say they are online almost constantly. This is not only an American phenomenon. Around the world, young people are growing up in information environments increasingly shaped by digital and social media. Young people are not online just for entertainment. A 2025 study by CIRCLE at Tufts University found that 77% of young Americans ages 18 to 34 named at least one social media platform or YouTube among their top three sources of political information. This shows why it is so important for young people to know how to question the information they see online.

We are living in a highly digital age and limiting the amount of time young people spend online is not enough. We need a better and more sustainable solution: educating young people so they can navigate the online world wisely. But young people are not only consumers of information. They are creators, as well. The same CIRCLE study found that 29% of young people sometimes created their own political content after seeing political content online. This is why young people should not be seen only as consumers or only who are affected by misinformation. They can also be part of the solution as well.

Before discussing solutions, we also need to understand why misinformation is difficult to fight. False information does not always look obviously false. It can come through a misleading headline, a video taken out of context, an edited image, or even a real fact presented without important details. Once we see something repeatedly on social media, it can become easy to accept or share it without checking. This is where media literacy becomes important.

As a journalism student one of the basic rules I have learned is simple: verify before you publish. It is very simple, but also important. Before using information, we are expected to ask questions about the source, and the context. But today, publishing information is no longer something only journalists do. Every time we post, repost, or share something online, we are contributing to the media. So why should media literacy belong only to journalists? If everyone can publish, everyone should know how to verify. It does not mean that everyone should have journalism education or training, it means we shouldn't forget verification skills are an important part of media literacy.

These skills should become everyday digital skills: checking who created the information, looking for evidence, comparing different sources, understanding the context, and thinking before sharing. And these skills can be taught. The American Psychological Association highlighted a media literacy program involving 2,278 students in 2024. Before the training, only 6% correctly identified the agenda behind an advocacy website. And six weeks later, it reached 49%. These results show that media literacy is not something we are born with, but we can learn and improve. But how do we make this education interesting and effective for young people?

I think there are several approaches we can use. First, we must acknowledge that media literacy should be a regular part of education, like math, literature, and history. It should begin in middle school. I would like to share an example from one of the journalism classes at my university. At DePaul University, one of my professors asked us to bring one local, one national, and one international news story to class twice a week. At first, this might sound overwhelming, or maybe unnecessary. But we needed three kinds of news instead of just one from Chicago.

Expanding the region also means expanding our sources, asking more questions, improving our verification skills, and learning more about the world. Although this is only one example from a university, we can use a similar, simpler version of this technique with middle and high school students. Another idea is peer mentorship: if young people are well-educated, they can mentor the younger students. Teaching someone else can also help students practice what they have learned, and learning from someone closer to their age can make the experience more engaging and interesting.

Instead of starting from zero with every generation, our aim should be to create a cycle for young people who learn these skills and help pass them on. Another solution is to create youth-led news organizations. Young people are already active on social media, and many know how to create videos, follow trends, and reach an audience. We can use these existing skills more productively by creating spaces where young people produce reliable news and informative content.

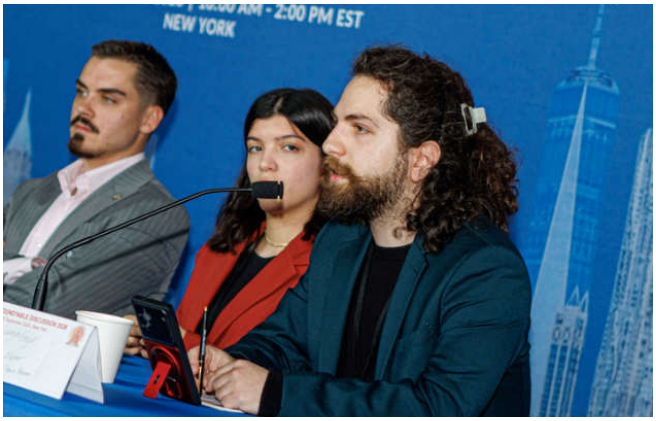
Since young users understand what catches their attention online, they can find creative ways to make reliable news interesting to their peers. These organizations could be led by young people with support from professional journalists. They could report local stories, conduct interviews, create short news videos, and fact-check information for platforms that young people already use. This would give them a chance not only to learn media literacy, but also to practice it and become part of the solution.

In conclusion misinformation is not something we can eliminate, but we can become better prepared to deal with it. Combating misinformation requires more than removing false information. We need stronger media literacy, better verification skills, and access to different sources. My hope is that we can create a society where people do not simply accept or share information but take the time to question it.

Suayb Geyik, Marketing, Social Media, and Public Relations Officer, Pinnacle College - Australia
Panelist: Youth Initiatives to Reduce Polarization, Hatred, and Hostility

Suayb Geyik is an architect, community leader, and humanitarian volunteer based in Australia. His work focuses on community development, education, intercultural dialogue, and peacebuilding. He is a founding member of the Intercultural Peace Forum in Australia and works with Smiley Africa to improve access to education and create better opportunities for children in Zambia.

Alongside his professional work in architecture and public relations, Suayb contributes to initiatives that bring people from different cultures and backgrounds together. He believes meaningful change begins with understanding, kindness, and working together to build more peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable communities.



Even though it might seem that I come from the other side of the world, South Australia, I have been fortunate enough to travel across many continents and countries and experience different parts of the world. With these experiences, I have had a chance to see and learn about many different youth initiatives. I would like to start by thinking about what we really mean by the phrase "youth initiative." To me, an initiative begins when someone notices a need and decides not to walk past it.

Let me present you a quick example. While living in Africa, I saw children facing serious barriers to education. Together with my friends, we started a campaign to support access to boarding schools. People responded of course, not because the idea was extraordinary, but because there was a need, and it was real. Youth initiatives often begin in the same way. They can be an education program, a sports club, a social project, or even a protest. Behind each one is a simple message: something is missing, and we can do something about it.

I believe this is also where our response to polarization and hatred can begin. I do not think reducing hatred always requires a campaign called "Stop Hate" or like "Love Each Other." You do not need those titles all the time. They are important, but sometimes a stronger approach is to create spaces where people who would never normally meet have a reason to come together. I have seen this in different parts of the world. In Europe, for example, I saw groups coming together to protect cultural heritage. In Africa, initiatives focused on social needs and community support. In Australia or Canada, and I am sure in America as well, organizations brought people together to learn a language and build a new life. The purpose was different in each place, but the result was often the same: people who might have remained strangers had a reason to meet. When people meet, something changes, doesn't it? A label becomes a name.

At international networking events, after learning which countries individuals come from, I do not ask what their occupations were. Some of them are lawyers or have high-level titles, but I do not even ask for more details. We had so many communalities I realized. Even people from countries in conflict can find something they agree on, and they can build something together. Hatred grows in distance. Understanding grows through encounters. Perhaps our task is to create initiatives so meaningful, open, and human that division has less space to survive. If we build them on dignity, dialogue, and shared purpose, youth initiatives can become more than a project. They can become bridges to achieve progress together.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