

Faith-based Entrepreneurs: Stronger Together
International Networking Conference
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(Ecumenical Centre)
Opening Remarks

By

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Welcome

On behalf of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Rev Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, WCC general secretary, I would like to warmly welcome all of you to Geneva, to the Ecumenical Centre and to this important conference on Faith-based Entrepreneurs: Stronger Together International Networking.

The WCC is a fellowship of 348 Orthodox Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed, many united and uniting churches, Mennonites, Friends, Congregationalists, Disciples and African Indigenous Churches in over 120 countries. The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world. I am very happy to note that in this gathering we have with us sisters and brothers from the Roman Catholic Church and Evangelical traditions whom we cooperate with under the umbrella of the Global Christian Forum, among other fora.

Starting points

As I am tasked to give the opening remarks, it is important to lay out our key starting points. Many but not all of us who are here today are business people or entrepreneurs. Some of us work with faith-based organisations. What unifies us is our faith in Jesus Christ. Our Christian faith commands us to "love God...and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves" (Matthew 22: 36-40). Our Christian faith calls us to take great care of God's wondrous gift of life-in-creation. These are our starting points.

Global challenges

The second point on what we also happen to have in common is that we all live in one planet. Our only home: the Earth. And it is an increasingly beleaguered one.

Our world today is characterised and shaped by widening socio-economic inequalities, where on the one hand 8 men (all of them business people and entrepreneurs coming from arguably Christian backgrounds) own as much wealth as half the global population; and where on the other hand close to a billion people do not have even the basic necessities for

survival: food, water, a roof over their heads. Indeed, global and national wealth disparity is considered by the World Economic Forum – which is gathering again in Davos after this conference – as “the biggest threat to the global economy”.

It is also a world confronted by deepening ecological challenges, not least a warming climate that will further aggravate living conditions for the most vulnerable. The latest data from NASA reveals that the last 3 years, i.e. 2015, 2016 and 2017, are the top three hottest years ever recorded. Needless to say, the consequences of climate change are already being felt by millions of people around the world, especially the poorest, from drought-stricken farms and villages in Africa to storm-devastated regions in Asia, the Americas and Europe.

The international community has of course responded through the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015 and the Paris Agreement in December 2015. The SDGs are ambitious, and significant. Among others, SDG 1 aims to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, SDG 10 is a call to reduce inequalities and SDG 13 urges immediate actions to tackle climate change and its impacts.

At the WCC we are committed to promote the SDGs as part of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace launched in 2013 (the brochure is in your kits). In fact, the theme of the pilgrimage of justice and peace for 2018 is Ecumenical Diakonia and sustainable development. Ecumenical Diakonia is understood from two perspectives: a) a theological understanding of Diakonia, seeing diakonia as a dimension integral to the nature and the mission of the church; b) The second perspective is practical, describing how churches are engaged in diaconal action across confessional and geographical boundaries.. Diakonia thus expresses a strong link between what the churches are and what they do: the churches' being and their joint action as a worldwide communion of Christians and institutions, and the social reality in which diaconal action is performed.

Ecumenical diakonia builds on the understanding that diakonia is faith-based and rights-based action. The two dimensions are intimately inter-related; they affirm each other mutually, and they urge churches and diaconal agents to engage in transformative and liberating action, developing forms of prophetic diakonia, defending human dignity and promoting justice and peace.

Business has a role to play

Sisters and brothers, our Christian faith calls us to dream big dreams: healthy, peaceful communities living in fullness and in harmony with a flourishing ecology (cf. John 10:10 and Isaiah 65:21-25).

To get there we need to construct a different economy, a decarbonised economy that provisions for the needs of all people. In other words we need deep-seated changes – not business-as-usual – in the way we run

our economies, the way we produce, invest, distribute and consume goods and services.

Such a change requires political and social consensus. We need genuine dialogue on impacts, needs and expectations between countries and among all sectors of society: business, government, labour, civil society including faith-based organisations. This also calls for partnerships – partnerships that are oriented towards peoples' wellbeing and the protection of our planet – across nations and groups.

Such a change entails new directions in business and investment, political choices and moral and spiritual inspiration. These in turn demand a different kind of leadership based on accountability and transparency.

More specifically, we need business leaders and entrepreneurs who are able to look beyond profit margins and shareholder values. We need political leaders who are not fettered to the concept of growing for growth's sake or to the interests of certain sectors, who possess the courage to make difficult decisions for the common good. And we need religious leaders who lead by example and who must constantly remind us that our scriptures teach us to look after those who are in greatest need as well as to be good stewards of creation.

Given the scale of the challenges in front of us, everyone, every sector, has a critical role to play. But particularly for this forum it is important to highlight those businesses and start-ups – working together with communities and governments – could make a critical difference.

You may ask how? Let me share a few examples:

- By paying their fair share of taxes that could help to finance public education, health, housing, infrastructure and other social protection programmes for socio-economically marginalised people;
- By divesting from speculative, ecologically-destructive or resource-depleting activities (notably the WCC divested from fossil fuels in 2014);
- By investing instead and for instance in clean, renewable energy and climate-resilient agriculture and infrastructure;
- By innovating and producing in ecologically-friendly ways;
- By generating decent jobs that sustain families; and
- By sharing gains with employees and vulnerable communities.

Summary

In closing and to summarise, I hope that this conference will be an open space to reflect on some important questions: What does it mean to be a Christian business or a Christian entrepreneur in a time of inequality and climate change? How can a Christian business or entrepreneur put into practice God's preferential option for the poor or care for creation into practice? Finally how can we as Christian businesses or entrepreneurs support each other and work together as well as with other like-minded

actors in churches, other faiths and religions, civil society and government to build a better world for our children and grandchildren?

No doubt, together, we can change the world.

I wish us all a fruitful and enriching conference.