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Agenda item 16
Culture of peace

Promotion of a culture of peace and interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

      In the present report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 75/25 and 75/26, the Secretary-General presents an overview of actions undertaken by the United Nations system to promote a culture of peace and interreligious and intercultural dialogue, indicating the main trends and issues, scaled-up activities and progress made during the period from May 2020 to August 2021.

I. Introduction

1.   In its resolutions [75/25](), on follow-up to the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace, and [75/26](), on the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to the Assembly at its seventy-sixth session on the implementation of the resolutions across the United Nations system. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has coordinated the preparation of the present report with contributions from 31 United Nations entities.[1]

2.   The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which has continued to shape events during the reporting period, has set in motion unprecedented suffering, amplifying the inequalities that persist within and among societies, thus presenting additional challenges with regard to intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Widespread border and venue closures, together with physical distancing measures, have given rise to new challenges, including restrictions to mobility, physical spaces for intercultural dialogue and social practices. Beyond being a health crisis, the pandemic has become a human rights crisis with wide-ranging impacts across societies. The economic, social and health impacts have been significant, in particular for middle- and low-income countries, and about 100 million people have been pushed below the poverty line. School closures have affected billions of children, with long-lasting effects for many.

3.   The crisis has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, which have in turn increased the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis, in particular in vulnerable populations. Gaps in income, opportunities, health coverage, social protection, environmental degradation and the climate crisis have been highly exposed. The crisis has also included increases in discrimination, exclusion and human rights violations. Widening inequalities and declining public trust in leaders and institutions have sparked civil unrest worldwide.

4.   On the other hand, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital transformation has been accelerated beyond even the most ambitious forecasts. Digital technologies have provided the means to connect with one another, to continue to receive an education and to gain access to culture for legions of people confined to their homes under lockdown measures. However, gaping inequalities in online access, the use and abuse of data and, in some cases, the instrumentalization of online

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[1] Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Department of Global Communications, Department of Peace Operations, Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Development Coordination Office, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Labour Organization, International Organization for Migration, International Telecommunication Union, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Office of the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Technology, United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Development Programme, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations University, United Nations Volunteers programme, World Food Programme and World Tourism Organization.

platforms to spread fear and hate have amplified the need to strengthen cooperation in the digital sphere.

5.   The urgency of intercultural and interreligious dialogue and of promoting a culture of peace in COVID-19 recovery and beyond have been raised during the reporting period. At a time when physical distancing measures have been imposed to combat the pandemic, dialogue, mutual understanding, solidarity and trust have emerged as sources of solace and a crucial link between peoples. They have brought people together, across borders, cultures and languages, to focus on their common objective of building a better, fairer, more sustainable future for all, a future in which human rights are realized for every person. To achieve a breakthrough, it must be recognized that humanity's very future depends on solidarity, trust and its ability to work together as a global family to achieve common goals.

II.   Current challenges

6.   Events during the reporting period heightened resolve to end the scourge of structural inequalities and discrimination in societies. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been disproportionately borne by people of African descent and ethnic minorities, who have experienced higher excess mortality.[2] Entrenched inequalities in health, education and employment were further highlighted as various social movements drew the world's attention to the systemic human rights violations endured by Africans and people of African descent. As the COVID-19 pandemic spread, hate crimes against ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and indigenous peoples increased steeply, reinforcing persistent barriers to social inclusion and diversity. Anti-immigrant, white supremacist, ultranationalist, antisemitic and Islamophobic expressions have also increased. The trends risk setting back progress made towards inclusive policies and have increased the need for decisive, equitable and urgent action to eliminate hate crimes and curb the proliferation of racism and xenophobia. Similarly, new forms of inequality and discrimination have surfaced through prejudice and exclusion with regard to access to health care and vaccines. They, together with negative economic impacts and a lack of access to health services, have collectively led to further marginalization and, in some countries, increased tensions and protests.

7.   Deep-rooted and pervasive gender inequalities have been brought to the fore.[3] The reporting period was marked by an upsurge in gender-based violence, as stay-at-home orders to combat the pandemic meant that women and children risked being confined with their attackers. In April 2020, the Secretary-General issued a global call emphasizing the need for an end to all violence against women, including in the home. Disruptions in social and protective networks, as well as decreased access to services, have intensified the vulnerable situation of women and girls. Existing gender gaps in labour market participation and access to finance, as well as an imbalanced distribution of unpaid care and domestic work and representation at the top management levels, have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions to sexual and reproductive health care have added to the significant impact of

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[2] United Nations, "COVID-19 and human rights: we are all in this together", April 2020; OHCHR, "COVID-19 and minority rights: overview and promising practices", 4 June 2020; United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), "Implications of COVID-19 for the Afro-descendant population in Latin America and the Caribbean", technical brief, 28 April 2020; and OHCHR, "Disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on racial and ethnic minorities needs to be urgently addressed – Bachelet", 2 June 2020.

[3] UN-Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: the gender snapshot 2021", 2021; and report of the Commission on the Status of Women on its sixty-fifth session (E/2021/27-E/CN.6/2021/14).

COVID-19 on women. Girls are at a higher risk of dropping out of school because of school closures. Estimates indicate that an additional 13 million girls will enter into child marriage in the next decade as a direct consequence of the pandemic.[4] Women remain underrepresented as subjects, sources and journalists, and not least as science experts, in news stories related to COVID-19. Throughout the world, women working to promote a culture of peace – in journalism to peacebuilding – have come up against steep obstacles and resistance and have been disproportionately attacked or threatened. Combined, these factors have weakened social cohesion and the social fabric of communities, set back progress in gender equality and women's empowerment and inhibited the equal and meaningful participation of women in dialogue and peacebuilding in line with the women and peace and security agenda (Security Council resolution 1325 (2000)).

8. Instability, economic hardship and scarcity of basic resources have prompted a shift in conflict dynamics, involving a diversity of actors. Drivers of conflict increasingly include widespread criminality, circulation of small arms and weapons, the presence of mercenaries, growing inequality, political manipulation of populations, a lack of good governance, unemployment and geopolitical tensions. Concerns over possible attacks against soft targets, including places of worship and other religious sites, have emerged during the crisis.[5] The Security Council and the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1373 (2001) concerning counter-terrorism have addressed the threat of extreme right-wing terrorism (or racially or ethnically motivated terrorism) that targets religious and ethnic groups, including in an open briefing held by the Committee on 9 October 2020.[6] The 2021 session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues stressed the importance of recognizing the institutions and land rights of indigenous peoples in contributing to peace and security, in particular given the increase in conflicts over indigenous lands and territories during COVID-19 lockdowns.[7] Situations of food insecurity aggravated by the pandemic have highlighted the link between hunger and armed conflict as a vicious circle: war and conflict can cause food insecurity and hunger, just as hunger and food insecurity can cause latent conflicts to flare up and trigger the use of violence.[8] Similarly, the interconnected risks of climate change and conflict – already exerting massive pressures on livelihoods, security and well-being – have exacted a heavier toll owing to the pandemic. The impacts are especially harsh in least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States, which also face higher risks from climate threats, thereby complicating their efforts towards sustainable development.

9. The acceleration of digital technologies has highlighted the need for equitable access and action to tackle growing threats experienced in online spaces. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated first-hand the importance of being connected. Working, studying, receiving basic services such as online banking and tele-health and obtaining access to life-saving information online has been a crucial lifeline for

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[4] UNFPA, "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family planning and ending gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and child marriage", interim technical note, April 2020.

[5] Security Council, Virtual open briefing of the Counter-Terrorism Committee on "protection of 'soft' targets against terrorist attacks", 27 January 2021.

[6] Security Council, Virtual open briefing of the Counter-Terrorism Committee on "emerging trends rights-based approach", 9 October 2020. See also Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate *Trends Alert*, "Member States concerned by the growing and increasingly transnational threat of extreme right-wing terrorism", April 2020 and July 2020.

[7] Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues on its twentieth session (E/2021/43-E/C.19/2021/10).

[8] Henk-Jan Brinkman and Cullen S. Hendrix, "Food insecurity and violent conflict: causes, consequences, and addressing the challenges", Occasional Paper No. 24, World Food Programme (Rome, July 2011).

people all around the world. Digital technologies have provided a connecting force during lockdowns and have generated new forms of innovative communication and dialogue through the convergence of cultures, media and information technology. However, a digital divide has meant that half the world's population has remained offline and that beneficiaries of intercultural dialogue programmes living in remote communities have been isolated. The combined challenges of gaps in digital access, along with limits to mobility and physical distancing, have marred progress in research, notably for early-career researchers in this field. Beyond issues of access, the prevalence and spread of misinformation and disinformation have become an "infodemic", putting at risk the access of citizens to reliable and verified information. Cyberattacks on entities such as hospitals and research centres have directly endangered the lives of innocent people. Meanwhile, social media has been used to fuel discrimination, xenophobia and racism, exacerbating polarization. In some parts of the world, the pandemic has been used as a pretext to restrict freedom of expression and media freedom.

10. While COVID-19 response efforts have been backed by substantial public support, not all countries have the same financial leverage. Moreover, with regard to interreligious and intercultural dialogue, the magnitude of the above-mentioned issues has not been matched by the same level of political will or financial support, creating further obstacles owing to the long-term nature of such dialogue and in fully gauging its impact. Concerted efforts in recent years have been focused on addressing fragmentation. However, more integrated coordination is needed that harnesses the interlinkages between the peace, development and humanitarian sectors, or the "triple nexus approach", and strengthened engagement between various levels of governance and a broad range of stakeholders. During the reporting period, States faced challenges in responding to threats because resources were diverted away from peace processes to combat the spread of the pandemic. Border closures and travel restrictions have prevented access to conflict-affected areas, thus affecting international mediation efforts and severing assistance to vulnerable populations that need it the most. A context of widespread insecurity has been compounded by a lack of implementation of peace agendas and a resistance to addressing discrimination against vulnerable people. In some reports, it has been suggested that the pandemic is being used as an excuse to cut funding for institutions dedicated to peace agreements. Ongoing tensions, coupled with a lack of trust in government or political leaders, have created a perfect storm for an escalation in violence. Civil unrest in response to the pandemic has surged around the world, adding to the estimated 244 per cent global increase in riots, strikes and anti-government demonstrations between 2011 and 2019, according to the Global Peace Index.[9]

11. The challenges that the world is confronted with today are not limited by borders, and no country is immune. Moreover, as the COVID-19 pandemic has spread, so have an alarming number of tensions, conflicts and scapegoating, which have made interreligious and intercultural dialogue all the more important. Given this context, addressing the above-mentioned issues requires a global response based on solidarity and renewed multilateral cooperation. It also requires coordinated action at all levels as part of a vision for sustainable and peaceful societies. COVID-19 has demonstrated the fundamental and inevitable interconnectedness of societies. Promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue builds on the shared human condition and values as a source of unity, not division. Such an approach expands on diversity as a richness through which all people are respected and can fully participate in their societies. This also extends to the digital sphere. The acceleration of digital technologies has required strengthened cooperation in the field of digital governance

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[9] Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index 2021: Measuring Peace in a Complex World* (Sydney, June 2021).

to ensure that all people have equal access to the technologies. Securing effective cooperation across differences is the only way to successfully tackle such major shared challenges. It entails an assertive approach to COVID-19 response and recovery to drive transformative change towards more just societies through the shaping of a new social contract on the basis of equality and inclusion. The rights of all must be front and centre in ensuring that no one is left behind.

III. A culture of peace and intercultural and interreligious dialogue in COVID-19 recovery efforts

12.   Intercultural and interreligious dialogue has shaped COVID-19 response efforts and is already driving recovery strategies forward. A number of policy briefs have been issued in which it is emphasized that whole societies must come together to reach the most vulnerable. Among them, "A United Nations framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19", launched in April 2020, comprises five work streams, including a dedicated pillar for promoting social cohesion and investing in community-led resilience and response systems during and after the pandemic. A key component of the work is fostering dialogue between State institutions and civil society actors, including women and youth activists, representatives of migrant and diaspora groups, faith-based organizations and religious leaders. Country-level socioeconomic response plans provide an opportunity to strengthen social cohesion and community dialogue by identifying and addressing risks early on and building resilience to potential disruptors, which is key to preventing violence or further crises, such as hate speech. In the context of recovering from and responding to the global pandemic, the High-level Forum on the Culture of Peace, convened by the President of the seventy-fourth session of the General Assembly in September 2020 on the theme "The culture of peace: change our world for the better in the age of COVID-19", emphasized the critical importance of global solidarity and resilience to stand against the spread of hate, intolerance, division and discrimination. Dialogue has emerged not only as an essential front against the spread of hate, intolerance, division and discrimination but also as an integral component of efforts towards an inclusive and sustainable recovery.

Box 1
Global solidarity: a compass for COVID-19 recovery

    Global solidarity has been the clarion call to tackling this global emergency, and dialogue is an essential basis on which to build these efforts. Dialogue has played an important role in the policy response to COVID-19, including campaigns to enhance well-being, resilience and conflict prevention. Likewise, global solidarity has become a convergence point in vaccine campaigns to ensure equal access to vaccines for all countries as a public good, such as the United Nations "Only Together" global campaign, launched in March 2021. The pandemic has provided a context that has pulled together the expertise of the United Nations system in joint efforts to address the wide-ranging impacts of the pandemic. Several joint statements and initiatives released during the reporting period have harnessed broad cooperation between various United Nations entities. In one such example, the International Labour Organization, the Peacebuilding Support Office, the World Health Organization and Interpeace joined forces to release a series of key recommendations entitled "From crisis to opportunity for sustainable peace: a joint perspective on responding to the health, employment and peacebuilding challenges in times of COVID-19". The United Nations policy brief

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entitled "COVID-19 and transforming tourism", spearheaded by the World Tourism Organization with contributions from 11 other United Nations entities, on the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic, was prepared to help to steer the equitable and sustainable recovery of international tourism following the industry's 74 per cent decline in 2020. The experience of the pandemic has elevated the critical importance of ensuring that dialogue approaches are integrated into multidimensional humanitarian and development actions as an operational imperative of COVID-19 and beyond.

A. Coordination and leadership

13. Despite the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reporting period included several constructive examples of inter-agency coordination and leadership in specific areas of work. The pandemic has brought issues to a tipping point, which has compelled broad action with regard to social inclusion and an integrated and collaborative approach between various levels of governance. The impact of the pandemic has led to significant adaptation in the coordination of initiatives and has shaped the priorities in United Nations system-wide strategies with regard to intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Owing to restrictions to curb the pandemic, many dialogue activities – from peacebuilding to education and culture – have made use of digital technologies and online spaces to ensure their continuation. Efforts to broaden United Nations cooperation with a range of actors were strengthened in the digital sphere to promote digital technologies and access to the Internet as part of plural and inclusive societies in which everyone has equitable opportunities. The way in which authorities perform amid this crisis will be decisive in enabling the use of institutional means to shift the political stage towards greater social inclusion, as well as to avoid widening the divide between citizens and between citizens and the State.

14. Efforts towards a culture of peace have continued to be strengthened through key United Nations system-wide strategies that mobilize a range of actors. The United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, launched in 2019, continued to be rolled out, led by the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, with a particular focus on pursuing activities to boost cooperation at the national level. The Office provided support through technical assistance and capacity-building extended to United Nations country offices in developing their own context-specific action plans, including a detailed guidance issued in September 2020.[10] The United Nations Development Programme has implemented the Plan of Action in 72 countries in cooperation with a range of actors, including faith-based organizations and faith-based actors, which have been pivotal in identifying entry points for dialogue and alternative narratives to counter hate speech, misinformation and extremist narratives. UNESCO has been leading global consultations with online platforms, regulators and civil society and has published a set of transparency principles with a view to developing international standards for platform transparency. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic created a tool in a local language to monitor radio and Internet messages to alert authorities when hate speech occurs and to help to prevent conflict. Similarly, a mapping exercise of hate speech carried out by the Development Coordination Office across a number of United Nations country teams in October 2020 showed both progress in tracking online hate speech by country office and significant diversity in

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[10] "United Nations strategy and plan of action on hate speech: detailed guidance on implementation for United Nations field presences", September 2020.

terms of experiences, investments and approaches in the countries. The approach evidenced throughout the reporting period points to efforts to accrue a more nuanced understanding of the diversity and contextual nature of hate speech.

15.   In line with practice in previous years, peacebuilding has increasingly taken on an integrated approach, drawing on expertise across the three pillars of the United Nations – peace and security, human rights and development – as well as humanitarian efforts. Notably, actions have been carried out to better align the coordination of operations in the humanitarian, development and peace areas in the new generation of the common country analyses and cooperation frameworks. A number of cooperation frameworks address risk reduction and prevention from a cross-pillar angle, ranging from conflict resolution and peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia and Uganda to human mobility in Mexico and Paraguay. Increasingly, common country analyses and cooperation frameworks are incorporating intercultural dialogue dimensions, such as by addressing sociocultural and religious interlinkages in development work and identifying religious and ethnic minorities in humanitarian and crisis contexts. Throughout the reporting period, human rights advisers provided by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights supported resident coordinators and United Nations country teams in 43 countries, including by integrating a human rights perspective into common country analyses and cooperation frameworks. Other entities have leveraged cross-pillar approaches through their respective mandates to nurture peace and prevent the triggers of violence and conflict. For example, in 2020, the World Food Programme assisted 16 million children through its school feeding programme, including in countries affected by conflicts and in internally displaced person and refugee settings around the world. School meals managed through community participation have been shown to foster solidarity, cooperation and trust among communities, as well as to restore a sense of normalcy and stability in children. Such efforts are crucial, given the growing complexity of conflict and its bearing on development outcomes.

16.   Actions were stepped up to combat the alarming increase in attacks on cultural property, including places of religious significance, which can result in destruction, looting and illicit trafficking. As many heritage sites have been closed to the public during the pandemic, they have become increasingly vulnerable to vandalism and looting. As part of monitoring and implementing the United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites: In Unity and Solidarity for Safe and Peaceful Worship, in September 2020, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations rolled out a global communications campaign, entitled #forSafeWorship, which has reached over 3 million people on social media. The Alliance and the Operational Satellite Applications Programme recently carried out a joint mapping exercise of religious sites in a number of pilot countries that is focused on building understanding of and respect for the sites among individuals and communities. A new programme entitled "Heritage for Peace" was launched by UNESCO to leverage cultural heritage as a genuine tool for the protection of peace and to strengthen its role in conflict prevention and resolution. As part of the programme, a massive open online course on cultural property protection for peace mediators is under development. The course incorporates intercultural skills and the promotion of intercultural dialogue as a key resource for mediation in conflict prevention and resolution, as well as peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery.

Box 2
Paving the way for strengthened digital governance

The Secretary-General's Road map for Digital Cooperation, launched in June 2020, lays out a vision for a more open, inclusive and safe digital future for all that seeks to harness the benefits of digital technologies while mitigating their challenges. Led by the Office of the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Technology, the Road map is underpinned by a human rights-based approach and takes into consideration ways in which technology is used to violate and erode human rights, deepen inequalities and exacerbate existing discrimination. Harassment and hate speech online can lead to physical violence offline. Increased digitalization resulting from the current global health crisis has increased such threats.

The Road map responds to the need for technology governance, made more urgent by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, by strengthening multi-stakeholder cooperation in the digital space. Digital technologies and gaining access to the Internet are vital to creating inclusive societies in which everyone has equitable an opportunity for well-being. A multi-stakeholder digital inclusion coalition composed of Member States, civil society groups, the private sector and other stakeholders will be established to raise the voices of those who are not fully benefiting from digital opportunities. Work is continuing to implement the Road map through multi-stakeholder efforts and inter-agency collaboration in several targeted areas, including achieving universal connectivity, promoting digital human rights and digital inclusion and enhancing global digital capacity-building.

17. The efforts of UNESCO to develop the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence – the first global normative instrument in this domain – were significantly advanced during the reporting period by the approval of a bold and visionary draft instrument by representatives of Member States, which has been transmitted for adoption by the UNESCO General Conference in November 2021. The Recommendation will be a powerful tool to support the ethical use of artificial intelligence systems to promote sustainable development, reinforce peaceful and just societies and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. Furthermore, the Recommendation will provide concrete tools, such as ethical impact assessments and readiness assessment methodology, to help artificial intelligence actors to evaluate the benefits and risks of artificial intelligence systems throughout their entire life cycle. The United Nations University Institute in Macau, situated in China, has advanced the inclusive artificial intelligence discourse by conducting a cross-cultural analysis of artificial intelligence narratives and by highlighting the cybersecurity risks, misinformation and disinformation during COVID-19 that have adversely affected a culture of peace and security.

B. Knowledge and evidence

18. The promotion of a culture of peace and intercultural and interreligious dialogue is backed by existing platforms and networks that support the production and sharing of knowledge and evidence. A lack of data, however, prevents interreligious and intercultural dialogue from being fully understood and utilized effectively in peacebuilding and development strategies. Efforts have been made across the United Nations system to collect data to better gauge the impact of COVID-19 and to inform

support and recovery strategies in a range of dialogue-related areas. New dimensions of data in intercultural and interreligious dialogue have been researched to address data gaps related to vulnerable groups to ensure that their needs are better reflected in policy considerations.

19. Data avenues pursued during the reporting period have offered fresh insights into intercultural dialogue. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) developed the COVID-19 Population Vulnerability Dashboard, which provides access to data on populations vulnerable to COVID-19 at the national and subnational levels to improve preparedness and response. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) has provided technical expertise on the collection of data on violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure ethical and safety principles in data gathering. A rapid assessment of such violence was conducted from over 16,000 interviewees across nine countries: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen, representing the first of its kind in the region. UNESCO launched a landmark discussion paper on online violence against women journalists, who remain particularly exposed. The document presents the findings of a global study based on an unprecedented wide set of data that demonstrate the prevalence of online attacks and their link to disinformation, political campaigns and discrimination. The International Telecommunication Union/UNESCO Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development launched a comprehensive study, entitled *Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression*, that comprises a suite of sector-specific actionable recommendations and a 23-point framework to test disinformation responses. The Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers – co-chaired by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and comprising Member States, the World Bank, other United Nations entities, non-governmental organizations and academia – produced three briefing papers to better support children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups in their reintegration into society and to contribute to long-term peace. The data underline that the successful reintegration of children requires a long-term, multi-stakeholder approach that bridges the nexus of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities.

Box 3
Examining the interconnected risks of climate stress

Climate stress increases the need for peacebuilding through intercultural dialogue and the solving of shared problems. The Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States has taken steps to expand the knowledge base on the nexus of climate change and internal displacement in small island developing States, including impacts on social stability and cohesion. Around the Lake Chad basin, conflicts related to access to natural resources and water between the various users have intensified and have led to large migrations of populations. UNESCO and the Lake Chad Basin Commission are implementing the Biosphere and Heritage of Lake Chad project in five countries (Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Niger and Nigeria), which has brought together over 600 people from local communities to construct three biosphere reserve projects to link biodiversity conservation to the imperatives of peace and sustainable development. The objective is to harness biosphere reserves as local solutions to global problems such as climate change.

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20.   Indigenous peoples can often be marginalized in national statistical systems, which presents obstacles to addressing their needs in policies, as well as their participation in inclusive development. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean has carried out several activities related to indigenous peoples in the region to include indigenous peoples in national statistical systems, produce and disseminate disaggregated data on those groups, prepare studies on the situation of indigenous peoples within the framework of their rights and provide knowledge-sharing and technical assistance. Support was provided to several countries in preparing their 2020 censuses in view of boosting the inclusion of indigenous peoples in national statistical systems, including by reflecting indigenous self-identification and indigenous languages.

21.   UNESCO has continued to strengthen its partnership with the Institute for Economics and Peace to develop new data that will be published in a flagship global report, an interactive online platform and an operational support mechanism in 2021. By strengthening the evidence base on dialogue and its enabling environment, the project is aimed at boosting policy effectiveness and establishing a common basis for a shared vision.

C.   Capacity-building

22.   In a context of increasing complexity and precarity, acquiring the capacities to promote and benefit from a culture of peace and interreligious and intercultural dialogue has emerged as essential to meet present-day challenges and reimagine future societies. This includes nurturing the skills to produce accurate public information and to critically analyse media of various kinds, a crucial set of competences in the current era. From facilitating access to humanitarian assistance in communities affected by armed conflict to boosting the competencies of young civil society leaders, United Nations entities carried out a broad range of approaches during the reporting period to better equip societies with those necessary skills.

23.   Education is a key ally in building the skills and competences to operate in diverse societies. UNESCO has sought to strengthen the role of education and schools in the prevention of extremism while promoting a culture of trust and well-being that is grounded in human rights and an ethics of care. Since 2020, the UNESCO flagship initiative "Revive the spirit of Mosul" has enabled some 1,700 teachers and school principals, schoolchildren and parents to be trained in schools in Ninawa Governorate, in Iraq. As part of a "Short Lessons for Peace" campaign, materials on the prevention of violent extremism through education have been provided to over 22,500 learners. UNESCO has been active in developing guidelines for educators, including on the prevention of antisemitism through education, by building the resilience of young people to extremist ideologies and prejudice and by ensuring that textbooks and learning materials reduce explicit and implicit racism and bias. Through its story circles methodology, UNESCO has expanded its work in building intercultural capacities through a series of online training sessions for health-care and social workers, representatives of the International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities, young people and United Nations staff members. In addition, UNICEF has continued to co-host the Early Childhood Peace Consortium, which supports advocacy of high-quality, multisectoral and multilevel early childhood education that builds a culture of peace and strengthens individual and societal resilience.

24.   Activities across the United Nations system have demonstrated greater impetus for prioritizing young people as agents of change in peace processes; however, efforts have not been consistent. As requested in Security Council resolution 2535 (2020), youth, peace and security focal points are being identified to strengthen the capacity of peacekeeping operations and special political missions to implement the youth, peace

and security agenda. Young people are the focus of the fourth phase (2020–2024) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has been working closely with United Nations counterparts to amplify the message that human rights education is key to the engagement of young people in shaping a peaceful, just and sustainable world. Young researchers are the beneficiaries of a new partnership established by the United Nations Volunteers programme, the Peacebuilding Support Office and the PeaceNexus Foundation to enhance their contribution to peacebuilding efforts by supporting the research agenda of the Peacebuilding Support Office in four case study locations: Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Kyrgyzstan and the Western Balkans. From 2018 to 2021, more than 5,000 young people in Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia have benefited from the broad mobilization of youth-led organizations, universities and national stakeholders led by UNESCO and the Office of Counter-Terrorism to foster inclusive dialogue for the prevention of violent extremism. The employment of young people has been boosted in Yemen through the UNESCO/European Union "Cash for Work" project, which develops urban rehabilitation skills and promotes the confidence of young people as a channel for promoting peace and reducing the risk of conflict.

25. More broadly, harnessing the synergies between employment and a culture of peace remains underexplored. For this reason, the International Labour Organization joined the Peacebuilding Support Office to develop, in February 2021, a brochure entitled "Sustaining peace through decent work and employment", which emphasizes the role of employment and decent work in addressing conflict drivers, including lack of contact and dialogue among different social groups, including by gender, cultural background and religion; lack of opportunity, in particular for young people and women; and the existence of grievances over inequality, access to fundamental rights at work and exclusion. This is even more relevant in the context of the current COVID-19 crisis. The socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic can potentially ignite or exacerbate grievances, discrimination, mistrust and a sense of injustice regarding issues related to access to health services and social protection, employment and the securing of livelihoods.

26. To combat the surging spread of disinformation, as well as to improve journalists' coverage of issues related to the pandemic, UNESCO stepped up action to boost the capacities of journalists through massive open online courses. The global project, entitled "#CoronavirusFacts: Addressing the 'Disinfodemic' on COVID-19 in conflict prone environments", complemented these efforts by strengthening citizens' resilience to COVID-related misinformation through support for local media and fact-checking organizations. In April 2021, the UNESCO media and information literacy curriculum entitled "Think Critically, Click Wisely" was launched, which will form a basis of a new global effort to give people a solid foundation in these crucial skills in the face of rapid developments in the information and communication landscape. UNESCO trained 150 women journalists and over 70 media managers in India, Mali, Senegal and Sri Lanka to mitigate gender-specific risks in the field, in the newsrooms and online, in addition to giving a global massive open online course, which was attended by 1,235 participants from 121 countries. Moreover, it continued to support media organizations in applying the publication *Reporting on Violence against Women and Girls: A Handbook for Journalists* by launching projects in Nepal and South Sudan to enhance capacities to cover issues related to violence against women and girls and to promote gender equality in and through the media.

> Box 4
> **Training of women peace mediators**
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> As part of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel, UN-Women has trained 1,542 women mediators in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. To further promote the role of women in peacebuilding, it launched, together with the Sahel countries and regional organizations, the Programme to accelerate the implementation of the women's peace and security agenda for better conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the Sahel region. Dialogue is a crucial component of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. It can act as an antidote to defuse tensions and keep situations from escalating by introducing moderate voices into polarized debates, as well as promoting reconciliation in the aftermath of conflict. It is more effective if it includes all sectors of society, in particular women. In the Sahel, the participation of women in political and economic spheres is a strategic priority that is now increasingly integrated into development programmes in the region.

27. In contrast to the marked gender inequalities observed throughout the reporting period, some progress in gender-responsive peacebuilding has been reported. The Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs observed an increase in the number of women peacebuilders who briefed the Peacebuilding Commission, from 6 in 2019 to a record 25 in 2020. More systematic engagement with women peacebuilders, as well as better mainstreaming of the gender dimensions of peacebuilding into the Commission's analysis and advice, has contributed to boosting inclusivity and promoting a culture of peace. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has continued to strengthen decision-making processes in relation to peace processes and inter-ethnic dialogue as part of its community-led Dimitra Clubs. Notable headway was reported in the Niger, where Dimitra Clubs had facilitated the establishment of a permanent committee, half of whom are women peace mediator leaders, for the prevention and management of conflicts between farmers and herders. In Colombia, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has enrolled over 36,000 female-headed families in 14 departments to help to transform the household economies of people living in areas affected by drug trafficking.

D. Advocacy

28. A central rallying point for advocacy efforts has been the dissemination of the shared values of a culture of peace to combat the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. From music to film, the arts have been leveraged to share messages of peace and unity and to convey storytelling. The United Nations mobilized its network of 59 field offices for COVID-19-related coverage to counter intolerance and misinformation, as well as to highlight how the pandemic has intersected with existing systemic issues to exacerbate racism and xenophobia, hate speech and even nationalism. The strengthened collective front to counter the spread of dangerous narratives across the United Nations system was rolled out through various strategies ranging from amplifying positive voices through social media to enhancing journalistic standards and good practices.

29. As evidenced throughout the reporting period, the arts have served as a source of solace, entertainment and expression, as well as a means of bringing people together during the pandemic. In the context of the UNESCO initiative "Revive the spirit of Mosul", the Organization joined with the non-governmental organization Action for

Hope to use music as a medium to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue. A training seminar organized in Erbil, Iraq, in November 2020 was followed by a music concert in Khan Hammou El Kaddou, in Mosul, aimed at relaunching cultural life in Mosul and bringing various communities together through music. Arts practice as a driver of human rights in humanitarian and development programmes is a central tenet of the UNESCO programme Art Lab for Human Rights and Dialogue, which held 15 online consultations from April to October 2020 that resulted in a set of recommendations. Consequently, training and policy briefs are currently under way to support rights-based approaches to and ethical concerns of advancing cultural diversity.

30. During the reporting period, film continued to be a vehicle for expression and a means to raise awareness of key issues related to interreligious and intercultural dialogue. The Office of Counter-Terrorism's Victims of Terrorism Support Programme, which is implemented by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre, joined with the Department of Global Communications to release four documentaries to commemorate victims and survivors of terrorism from Cameroon, Mali, Nigeria, Norway and Spain. As part of the 2020 edition of the annual PLURAL+ Youth Video Festival, co-organized by the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, a selection of PLURAL+ films conveying messages of unity against racism and all forms of discrimination was screened, further highlighting the crucial importance of taking a stand against discrimination.

Box 5
Mobilizing a united global front against racism and discrimination

　　Significant steps were taken in the United Nations system towards tackling the scourge of racism and discrimination through the inaugural Global Forum against Racism and Discrimination, organized by UNESCO in partnership with the Republic of Korea in March 2021. The Forum welcomed the participation of ministers, experts, practitioners and advocates against racism and discrimination in a hybrid format, with a global live viewership of more than 5,000. The Forum provided significant input for the development of a new UNESCO Road map against racism and discrimination, to be structured around four strategic pillars to advance: normative frameworks, the knowledge base and evidence base, capacity-building and advocacy. The road map draws on the outcomes of six regional consultations on racism and discrimination that were held from September to October 2020. The implementation of the road map will integrate gender-transformative approaches into efforts to combat racism and discrimination on the basis of recommendations derived from six consultations with regional experts on gender stereotypes, which were held by UNESCO in January 2021. Global advocacy efforts, such as the video entitled *United Against Racism*, which was launched by UNESCO in August 2020, complemented the activities.

E. Partnerships

31. The nature of interreligious and intercultural dialogue requires multi-stakeholder cooperation. Local institutions and cultural and traditional leaders play an increasingly critical role in ensuring the success of dialogue processes. Notably in the context of COVID-19 response efforts, local actors have been well placed to find innovative solutions to effectively respond to challenges, and they have sometimes played a pioneering role in ensuring inclusive and equitable dialogue. Faith-based actors and faith-based organizations have also been active in partnering

in advocacy initiatives to promote solidarity and support health- and hygiene-related messaging in the face of COVID-19 pandemic. While solid partnerships to promote a culture of peace and interreligious and intercultural dialogue have been established and strengthened between faith-based actors and faith-based organizations and the United Nations, some Member States remain cautious regarding such engagement, and the integration of interfaith collaboration is not yet consistently considered in donor strategies. More can be done to systematize strategic partnerships, maximizing coherence and scaling impact, in particular in the field and backed by coordination structures at the national level.

32. Faith-based organizations can often be crucial allies in dialogue processes and fundamental partners in advancing peace. In Yemen, for example, UNFPA has worked with the organization Islamic Relief on promoting gender equality and protection against gender-based violence through training programmes for imams. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the organization Religions for Peace partnered to create a multi-religious council of leaders, comprising 20 leaders representing diverse faith traditions, to work together to address the root causes of forced displacement and to help those forced to flee by promoting peacebuilding, conflict prevention, inclusion and social cohesion in support of the global compact on refugees. In recent years, the United Nations Environment Programme has expanded its engagement with faith actors on environmental issues, thus increasing public attention to and engagement in environmental stewardship. Following the Faith for Nature Conference that was held in October 2020, over 450 participants from 15 religions pledged interfaith collaboration on sustainable development through their declaration, entitled "Our Sacred Commitment", which called for the establishment of a faith for Earth coalition as a self-sustaining global platform for faith groups to improve policy action.

Box 6
Leveraging the role of faith-based actors in COVID-19 recovery

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, faith-based actors have played an integral role in effective health messaging and in underlining solidarity. Their crucial role as partners in promoting a culture of peace has been emphasized as part of shaping future approaches in post-COVID-19 strategies. In May 2020, the Global Pledge for Action by Religious Actors and Faith-Based Organizations to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic in Collaboration with the United Nations was launched as a direct outcome of consultations with faith-based actors led by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Special Adviser on to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations. In follow-up to the Global Pledge, six monthly webinars were held to exchange good practices and lessons learned in promoting gender equality, addressing hate speech, safeguarding religious sites, protecting religious or belief minorities, preventing atrocity crimes and facilitating interfaith dialogue. The United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development, co-chaired by UNFPA, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, has continued its commitment to promoting a common United Nations system-wide approach to a culture of peace and interreligious and intercultural dialogue. The Task Force works in close collaboration with the Multi-Faith Advisory Council, which comprises 40 United Nations system faith-based partners, reflecting the diversity of religions, regions and national presence. During the reporting period, two key events were held: the Global Online Conference entitled

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"Faith in the United Nations: commemorating the 75th anniversary of the United Nations and looking to the future", which included reflections on the role of faith actors in promoting human rights and sustainable development (September 2020); and a symposium on gender equality in COVID-19 recovery (January 2021).

33. In line with recent trends, efforts were made during the reporting period to broaden stakeholder engagement, notably with civil society. The Office of Counter-Terrorism, which has strengthened its engagement with relevant peace operations and resident coordinator offices, has been implementing a civil society engagement strategy since March 2020 for more systematic and meaningful outreach and partnership with civil society actors. In Latin America, the project entitled "Inclusive Cities, Solidarity Communities", jointly implemented by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, the International Organization for Migration and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, has promoted the integration of Venezuelan refugees and migrants into urban contexts in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Peru and Trinidad and Tobago by utilizing tools to facilitate the peaceful resolution of local conflicts.

34. United Nations partnerships with regional and subregional organizations have resulted in notable progress, in particular in multi-stakeholder dialogue initiatives for conflict prevention. The Department of Peace Operations has reported that the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) supported the Ministry of National Reconciliation of Mali in establishing regional reconciliation support teams and municipal reconciliation committees. As a result, community dialogue among local authorities, religious leaders and civil society has been facilitated to prevent, manage and resolve intercommunal conflicts and to promote social cohesion and a culture of peace. The MINUSMA-supported teams and committees have helped to broker about 40 peace agreements, thus improving security and freedom of movement for civilians to resume economic activities and gain access to farmland and grazing land, markets and basic services, as well as paving the way for the return of internally displaced persons.

IV. Conclusions

35. As demonstrated in the present report, global solidarity and multilateral cooperation have emerged as crucial components of moving forward in the COVID-19 recovery. However, solidarity is unattainable without interreligious and intercultural dialogue, which acts as a powerful force that creates bridges across diversity to build peace, resilience, reconciliation and trust. As evidenced throughout the ongoing pandemic, dialogue has been a precious resource for community vitality and well-being, expression and innovation. The crisis has shown how people have mobilized to connect with one another and support those who are most in need. Dialogue shapes peaceful societies through recognition of and respect for the diversity of cultures and freedom of expression, paving the foundation for long-term peace and prosperity. The importance of dialogue in the lives of people and communities makes it a powerful component for building resilience and a basis for sustainable recovery and lasting peace.

36. The world is at a crucial juncture in technology governance, which has been made even more urgent by the pandemic. Digital technologies and artificial intelligence have provided a necessary lifeline to basic services, yet beyond the COVID-19 crisis, it is necessary to ensure that all people can obtain access to those benefits. Efforts to address widespread and persistent online hate speech will need to

be strengthened to prevent that scourge from spreading. Key developments during the reporting period to strengthen governance and ethical frameworks in the digital environment have laid the groundwork for broad stakeholder cooperation and to mitigate future risks. The development and use of digital technologies must be safe, transparent and equitable and a force for good. Enhancing media and information literacy competencies and digital skills is therefore critical to harness the power of digital technologies to advance peacebuilding.

37. Discrimination – including against individuals and groups on the basis of their ethnicity, origin, gender, age, disability or identity (such as culture and religion) – has been heightened by COVID-19. Fallout from the pandemic has, in some cases, pushed these issues to a tipping point and worsened already vulnerable contexts. While it is shown in the present report that women have had an increased presence at the negotiating table, notably in Africa, the social and economic impacts of the pandemic have been disproportionately borne by women and girls. The pandemic has catalysed an urgent need to overturn discriminatory societal structures. Deep, structural changes are needed to create a culture that is more conducive to peace, as well as to address the massive setbacks caused by the pandemic in progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women.

38. A new social contract must be based on trust, inclusion, protection and participation, as well as on measuring and valuing what matters to people and the planet. Social mobilization in response to collective outrage experienced across the world points to the burgeoning hope that societies can take decisive steps forward in tackling deep-rooted discrimination to achieve reparative change and more just and equal societies. The pandemic has laid bare not only persistent injustices but also pre-existing assumptions on how societies operate, at the individual, group and community level. This has the potential to open up new perspectives on work, learning, interaction, collaboration and socialization, helping people to move towards more inclusive and equal societies. It reinforces the growing consensus that, in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, it is paramount that there be a new social contract that fully addresses systemic inequalities, including cultural and identity-based grievances, before they lead to conflict and violence.

39. Threats to global peace and security are fuelled by interlocking challenges that threaten future progress. Present-day conflicts are increasingly complex and interconnected, which calls for integrated action to address the ills. As demonstrated during the reporting period, inequalities, unemployment and economic crises can trigger violence. Climate change has profound implications for peace and security, while competition over land and resources, food insecurity and water scarcity can amplify stress in fragile contexts. Moreover, as shown in the experience of pandemic restrictions, already vulnerable individuals and contexts have been left open to the exploitation of criminal groups. Holistic and whole-of-society approaches can align strong synergies in upstream prevention efforts to tackle challenges such as hate speech, hate crimes, violence and terrorism. Understanding such an interlinked and complex reality requires inclusive multilateralism, with wide engagement and partnership between a range of actors, including Governments and civil society, including faith-based actors, young people, women, the media and the private sector.

40. The nature, scale and intensity of the issues exposed and exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis have brought to light the fundamental role of interreligious and intercultural dialogue in ensuring inclusive, equitable and sustainable societies. International cooperation based on dialogue is crucial to turn the tide of the shared challenges faced across the world. The present report demonstrates that interreligious and intercultural dialogue is integral to the strategies of diverse United Nations entities for the response to and recovery from the pandemic, underscoring its importance as an

instrument for operationalizing the triple-nexus approach that leverages the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding dimensions to nurture and sustain peace.

41. As the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures nears its close, in 2022, Member States have a unique opportunity to build on the momentum of the work. To realize the full potential of interreligious and intercultural dialogue across the United Nations system, more political commitment is necessary. Long-term funding will be critical to foster greater coherence and coordination across United Nations entities, with joined-up, future-oriented programming in support of a common system-wide vision, strategy and action for interreligious and intercultural dialogue for peace.

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