Dialogue of Civilizations:
Finding Common Approaches to Promoting Peace and Human Development

A Framework for Action[*]

The Framework for Action is divided into four sections: The first section outlines the basic qualities that characterize a meaningful dialogue of civilizations, based on the assumption, and reaffirming the conviction, that dialogue of civilizations can and should be developed into a new paradigm for international relations. The following three sections then show what different actors on different levels of governance can do to foster those qualities: at the local level, in the national arena, and on the international stage (including regional actors).

I.   Promoting Dialogue of Civilizations

1.   The Dialogue of Civilizations has great potential to help prevent conflicts – on the international, national and local levels – by reducing misunderstandings and mistrust, and by laying the foundation for a non-violent resolution of controversies. It also has enormous potential to solve current and future economic, social and political problems by sharing experiences and through joint implementation of remedies.

2.   At its best, inter-civilizational dialogue can result in a collective sense of shared goals, enabling us to address the most important issues of all: What kind of future world do we want to live in? How can we work together to solve the problems facing humankind today, and begin creating that future? This does not necessarily imply a common approach to every issue, but without such a constructive dialogue the future is less likely to become one that we would

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want. After all, as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has pointed out, we live in a world of great diversity, but a diversity based on shared values of tolerance and freedom; a world which is defined by its tolerance of dissent, its celebration of cultural diversity, its insistence on fundamental, universal human rights, and its belief in the right of people everywhere to have a say in how they are governed.

3.   To attain this ambitious but necessary goal, a positive attitude towards cultural diversity has to be nourished at all levels of society. At the core of such a positive attitude are:

Knowledge
Diversity is often perceived as a threat to one's own individual or group identity. Dialogue, however, aims at better mutual understanding: of the values, norms, historical experience and cultural reality underlying the words and actions of others. Once knowledge takes the place of pre-conceived opinions, stereotypes and prejudices about others, "otherness" will be perceived less as a threat than as an enrichment.

Respect
In order to enter into a meaningful dialogue aimed at better mutual understanding, every individual has to be prepared to exercise tolerance towards other ways of thinking, towards people who base their daily lives on values and experiences other than our own. But tolerance alone is not enough: equally important is the notion of "respect" – for others as well as for oneself. While tolerance means not to interfere with other's ways of living or thinking, "respect" actually attaches a positive value to what one is or does – respect thus goes beyond mere tolerance.

Search for unity in diversity
A pluralistic view of human identity helps to illustrate how universality and particularity coexist at all times: Every person or social group in fact reflects a multiplicity of traditions and cultures. For this reason, all individuals differ in some respects, but in other regards have much in common. Herein lies the basis for dialogue, and at the same time its goal: To discover what one has in common with members of other cultures, religions, and ethnic, social or political groups, and on this basis to develop a feeling of joint responsibility for future generations, based on people's increased awareness about the common ethical principles underlying their specific value systems and the common cultural features and similarities in values among different civilizations.

Recognizing the dynamism of culture and civilizations
To avoid limitations to the discussion and practice of a dialogue of civilizations, the terms "civilization" or "culture" should not be perceived as fixed entities. As history has shown, neither cultures nor civilizations are static, but undergo a permanent process of change and renewal. Also, both "culture" and "civilization" should not be understood as entities defined solely by religion, state boundaries, or economic and political dominance, but rather loosely to refer to groups of people who share certain ways of organizing their societies - the traditions and values underlying their social, cultural, political and economic institutions in the broadest sense.

Inclusiveness

"Dialogue of Civilizations" refers to the act of listening to and learning to understand the beliefs, judgments, and worries of people not only with a different cultural, ethnic or religious background, but also with different political convictions, social positions and economic power. The process of dialogue should be open and inclusive, carefully containing attempts at "globalizing" the specific value systems of those currently in power politically or economically. Any social or cultural group should be able to join the dialogue and contribute to the process of defining the "global ethos."

Readiness to transform

Inter-civilizational dialogue is an ongoing process in which the participants show not only a willingness to exchange information by sharing their own thoughts and listening to others, but also the openness to transform their own world views by integrating other perspectives into their own ways of thinking. The recognition of differences alone does not yet lead to mutual understanding. It is only through a genuine receptivity to other viewpoints that mutual appreciation occurs.

4.   Actors at all levels of global society should join forces to develop in an effective way these fundamental constituents of a global "culture of dialogue." Arenas that most obviously lend themselves to such efforts are politics, legal systems, education, science, culture, and media and information.

II.   Local level: Capitalizing on the realities of multicultural societies

5.   In the multicultural societies of today, political actors and individuals alike are challenged to find ways to accommodate equitably the values and norms of the different cultural groups within the framework of a given society. The most immediate task for politics in this context is to reflect the diversity of cultures in its decision-making structures. All cultural groups in a locality should be provided with the ways and means to participate effectively in local policy-making within the democratic framework of society.

6.   Community leadership will be important to initiate and to maintain the process of dialogue within the community, preparing the ground, and providing the thrust, for dialogue at other levels of the global society.

7.   In education, diversity should be promoted in classes and in administration at all educational levels, including both formal schooling and adult education programmes. Teachers, school boards and others involved in the day-to-day effort of teaching should aim to nurture in students of all ages, in particular, self-respect, including pride in one's cultural, ethnic, national or other group identity, without basing that self-respect on value judgments about other cultures, ethnic groups or nations.

8.   Education should also emphasize the teaching of dialogue skills, such as basic literacy, language and interaction skills; skills to gather and analyse information; skills to determine how one's actions affect other people; skills to recognize and appreciate both the similarities

and the differences in other cultures, and to analyse how other viewpoints or ways of living can contribute to solving conflicts, inequities and other global problems.

9.   In the sphere of culture, public and civil society actors should step up their efforts to organize multicultural events to increase exposure to and enhance knowledge of different cultural and religious value systems, such as festivals, competitions, lecture series, etc.

III. National level: Facilitating the expression of diversity

10. It is a responsibility of national governments to reflect diversity in politics through a commitment to pluralism, placing particular emphasis on the involvement of those often under-represented in political decision-making, among them specifically women and the younger generations.

11. Governments should also endeavor to foster civil society engagement, by defining a legal framework that provides favourable conditions for non-governmental activities.

12. The legal systems of states should acknowledge differences in the legal traditions of various cultural groups within a society. A careful analysis of various legal traditions can serve to highlight cases where differences in legal attitude are not rooted in different understandings of the foundations of justice, but rather are a result of different ways of expression.

13. In education, national institutions, in a cooperative effort involving members of all cultural groups within the society, should increase their efforts to develop primary, secondary and tertiary – including higher – education curricula that emphasize the achievements of different civilizations, and how civilizations have benefited from each other. These curricula should also put increased emphasis on the comparative study of ethics to improve understanding of the ethical foundations underlying different civilizations.

14. Sufficient room should be allocated in education curricula to the teaching of foreign languages, with a particular emphasis on developing communication skills.

15. To foster the implementation of the curricula, national governments, in cooperation with civil society groups, should establish programmes to improve multi-cultural teaching methods through exchange of information, research and training for teachers.

16. In science, public and private academic institutions and research funding agencies should introduce, or lay stronger emphasis on, the exploration and dissemination of indigenous knowledge. Research programmes in all areas of science, including the natural sciences, medicine and engineering as well as the social sciences and humanities, should provide for the inclusion of traditional approaches and insights into their frameworks for problem-solving.

17. National governments should show a firm commitment to the preservation of all cultural heritage – popular or traditional, mainstream or minority – within their jurisdictions. They should encourage public and private academic institutions and funding agencies to create and implement programmes to study, report and analyse history from a variety of angles,

presenting views from different cultural contexts on a given historical event in order to increase understanding of the diversity of historical experiences.

18. As on the local level, national actors in the public and private spheres should step up their efforts to organize and support multicultural events to increase opportunities for direct intercultural exchange.

19. Accurate information about other cultures plays a crucial role in diluting stereotypes and prejudices. National governments should therefore ensure that all members of society enjoy easy access to information.

20. The media and other information channels, such as the Internet, are important means to disseminate information. To reflect the cultural diversity present in every society today and give room to the spreading of information about all different cultural groups and cultural viewpoints, it is important to create and maintain a diversity of information channels.

21. It is equally important to ensure that minimum standards of fair and just reporting and broadcasting are upheld by all information providers. National governments should encourage the establishment of self-regulatory bodies which set and monitor such minimum standards.

IV. International level: Working together to prepare the ground for sustainable dialogue

22. The international community should set an example in inter-civilizational dialogue by jointly taking up the challenge, and showing the necessary determination and patience, to ensure that globalization has a human face. This could be done by firmly asserting, not only in words but also through actions, that it is precisely the diversity of cultures which forms the foundation for human well-being and affluence, and that this diversity can only prevail in an atmosphere of equality, which includes, as a prerequisite, a balanced form of development.

23. Regional organizations have a vital role to play in the dialogue of civilizations, as they not only foster exchange and cooperation within their regions, but can provide important stepping stones for dialogue between regions.

24. Regional, together with international organizations, should also step up their efforts to provide increased opportunities for direct intercultural experiences: through exchange programmes in the fields of culture, academia, the media and other professions.

25. In the field of education, institutions should be strengthened to provide advice to national bodies in the development of school and university curricula and textbooks that emphasize inter-civilizational dialogue. Such institutions would best function on an intra-regional basis, but with provisions for the inter-regional exchange of information and successful methodologies.

26. International and regional organizations are also called upon to develop and expand programmes to support national efforts for better education in the skills and knowledge

necessary for a dialogue of civilizations. They should exploit fully the opportunities offered by new information and communication technologies, notably by stimulating the emergence of multimedia programmes for the general public focused on "Knowledge about Others." New distance learning technologies and concepts can be meaningfully employed to enhance the outreach of such programmes and to complement exchange programmes for teachers, students and education policy makers.

27. In the field of science, in order to increase knowledge about past dialogues among civilizations and to identify best practices, international organizations should develop a framework to promote the comparative study of the history of inter-civilizational dialogues.

28. With regard to culture, the international community should continue its efforts to assist different cultural groups in the preservation and dissemination of their cultural heritage.

29. International organizations should continue to sponsor cultural, academic and sports events which bring people of different cultural backgrounds together in the joint pursuit of common goals. While events taking up the dialogue among civilizations as their main theme are important to enhance awareness of the possibilities and characteristics of such a dialogue, a "mainstreaming" of the skills and attitudes conducive to dialogue throughout multicultural activities will help to firmly establish a "culture of dialogue."

30. In the area of information and communication, international actors from the governmental and non-governmental spheres alike should increase their efforts to counter the digital divide which still excludes many from access to information about other cultures and about different perspectives on current and past events.

31. To act as an effective facilitator of inter-civilizational dialogue by providing quality information about other cultures and different perspectives on world affairs, media around the world should increase their cooperation. Such cooperation could include exchange programmes for journalists and editors, an exchange of content to encourage direct exposure of audiences to other cultural perspectives, and the joint production of content to foster the identification of common denominators. Regional and international governmental and civil society organizations should develop programmes to support such activities.

http://www.unu.edu/dialogue

Appendix: The UNU Project on the Dialogue of Civilizations

In November 1998, the General Assembly of the United Nations in a unanimous resolution proclaimed 2001 as the "United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations." In doing so, the Assembly rejected the concept of a "Clash of Civilizations" which is based on the notion that inter-civilizational understanding is unattainable. The General Assembly expressed its firm determination to facilitate just such a dialogue, which is aimed at increasing mutual understanding and tolerance among peoples of different cultural backgrounds, through an active exchange of ideas, visions and aspirations.

Drawing upon its unique characteristic as an academic institution rooted in the United Nations system, the United Nations University (UNU) has undertaken a scientific exploration of the dialogue itself: What are the prerequisites of a meaningful dialogue? How can we best facilitate it?

Reflecting the global perspective of the UNU, it has brought together academics and other experts from diverse cultural backgrounds for in-depth discussions aimed at developing a better understanding of what is necessary to realize a meaningful dialogue among civilizations. The UNU held the following conferences and workshops:

- *UNU International Conference on Global Ethos* (24-26 October 2000, Tokyo)
- *UNU Workshop on the Contribution of Science to the Dialogue of Civilizations* (19-20 March 2001, Tokyo)
- *UNU Workshop on the Contribution of Media and Communication to the Dialogue of Civilizations* (26-27 April 2001, Tokyo)
- *UNU Workshop on the Role of Education in the Dialogue of Civilizations* (3-5 May 2001, Tokyo)
- *UNU Workshop on the Role of Ethics in the Dialogue of Civilizations* (24-25 May 2001, Tokyo)
- *UNU Leadership Academy Workshop on the Role of Leadership in the Dialogue of Civilizations* (17-18 June 2001, Amman)
- *UNU/UNESCO International Conference on the Dialogue of Civilizations* (31 July-3 August 2001, Tokyo/Kyoto)

Each of these workshops and conferences was in itself a dialogue of civilizations. They showed that even for those who have been much involved in issues of dialogue, discussions are not always easy, in particular when they touch upon specific values and norms. They also very clearly proved, however, that as long as there is agreement among all parties involved that it is better to talk than to fight each other, dialogue is possible and actually leads to new and creative solutions to the common problems facing mankind.