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**Sustainable Recovery
in Post-Pandemic Era**

Green Economy Challenges

Organized by: Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical
Research, Ss. Cyril and Methodius - University in Skopje,
Republic of North Macedonia and Institute of Social Sciences
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PREFACE

Instigated by a desire to contribute to the societal endeavours to cope with the challenges of the pandemic and with hope for domestic and international sustainable recovery with regards to each relevant functional area, the two oldest social science institutes in North Macedonia and Serbia - the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research at Ss. Cyril at Methodius University in Skopje and the Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade, in cooperation with the International Labour Organization organized the online international scientific conference *Sustainable Recovery in Post-pandemic Era: Green Economy Challenges* on 7 – 8 December 2021. This issue represents the Conference Proceedings following said Conference.

The Conference gained weight because of the significant attendance level of 119 authors from 20 countries, presenting 59 papers. As well, this scientific weight was due to the level of sophistication of the well-elaborated presentations on topics related to pressing contemporary issues regarding circular economy and development, geo-economics, labour market and green jobs, policy and governance, geo-politics, security, socio-demographics, education and public health.

Namely, the Conference aim to bring together scholars and researchers to discuss the issues of post-pandemic environmentally-sustainable economic recovery from the economic, social, public policy and legal standpoint was fully met. In the dawn of the pandemic crisis, the European Union launched the proposal of the Environmental European Law (2020) setting a legal framework to achieve the 2050 climate neutrality goal, only a year after the introduction of the European Green Deal (2019). The interconnection of climate action and environmental protection activities, dealing with social and political challenges and inclusive COVID-19 recovery was the central theme for critical consideration from both, theoretical and practical perspectives, creating the forum for holistic and integrative approaches' identification and development.

During the pandemic, governance and media practice have been changed as well.

The empowerment of the European Union industry and business, boosting the circular economy, particularly, the waste control and management as well as building the new Just Transition concept of workers and community adaptation to green jobs, alongside with introducing respective educational practices were the core focal issues of the Conference participants.

The public health crisis called for strong responses based on solidarity, co-operation and responsibility. That required the identification of current challenges find new paths to support key international and national actors in their efforts to “repair” and “transform” societies by tackling the inequities and, stimulating the growth.

The considerable research in these areas manifested in the particular works of the authors which were subsumed to vigilant double-blind peer review process, with assignment of two

field-related reviewers per paper, proceeded by detailed deliberation of separate Editors as well as by joint Editors' conferral. Each author accounted for the linguistic adequacy.

Finally, this issue of Conference Proceedings entails 15 papers, divided in two major sections: the first being titled *Politics and Society in Post-Pandemic Era* and the second is *Sustainable Recovery – Green Policy Levers*.

Both the Editors and the organizing entities are deeply grateful for the contribution to the Conference to all participants, to the authors for the quality of their papers and cooperation, to the committed reviewers, as well as to all assisting subjects in the process.

There are high hopes that the entirety of the ideas, through this issue, will be communicated to the policy makers, researchers and the broader public, thus contributing to the improvement of contemporary societal processes.

The Editors

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CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC REFLECTIONS ON THE INITIATIVES OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse and determine the potential of religious communities in Macedonia for achievement of particular sustainable development goals (SDGs), and what is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities of religious communities that correspond to the these goals. Given the commitment to inclusive partnerships at all levels (global, regional, national and local) as a necessary condition for obtaining these goals, it is not surprising that the support of religious leaders is emphasized in all global initiatives for successful realization of the SDGs. The foundation of these partnerships built upon common principles and values, is the initial basis for emphasizing common moral principles in religious teachings that are directly correlated with SDGs. Considering the scope of these goals, the focus of the analysis in this paper is directed towards the first two goals – no poverty and zero hunger. Thereby, these goals will be identified in the teachings of Christianity and Islam that is the forms of manifestation of these goals in the stated religious teachings, as well as their significance in these religions. In addition, initiatives of the religious communities regarding the stated goals after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic will be pointed out. To meet this objective, analysis was applied in both cases, with the first part analyzing the key aspects of the Holy Books of Christianity and Islam, where the importance of the

indicated goals in the teachings of both religions, was determined based on the views of prominent theologians, as well as their interpretations of the texts. While, the second part is a thematic analysis of the answers from the semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of religious communities in Macedonia.

Keywords: sustainable development goals, religious communities, humanitarian initiatives, COVID 19

1. Introduction

From 25 to 27 September 2015 at United Nations Headquarters in New York, all Heads of State and Government and High Representatives unanimously adopted the 2030 Agenda that consisted 17 Sustainable Development Goals, containing 169 global targets and 232 indicators to measure progress in implementation, and a set of follow-up and review principles and mechanisms. It was developed as a global action plan whose objective is to transform the world over the next 15 years. The 2030 Agenda was built on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to end extreme poverty, protect the planet and ensure peace and prosperity (UN, 2015). At the same time, the commitment of its creators was to provide a universal, transformative, ambitious, shared and common vision for all humankind, all religions and cultures, and all creatures on earth. And while the MDGs had been unilaterally set within the UN with little to no consultation with any stakeholders, SDGs were conceived as the largest participatory process, being developed through multi-stakeholder consultation (Tomalin, 2019).

In the consultation process, as well as in the implementation phase, the need and importance of support from religious communities was recognized. This recognition stemmed from the fact that over 80 per cent of people worldwide identify as members of a religious or spiritual community (UNEP, 2016), which in turn influence these people's views of the world around them. Religious practices, beliefs and values are deeply intertwined in the daily lives of believers, while leaders of churches, mosques, temples and other religious communities play an important role in shaping attitudes, opinions, behaviors and dealing with societal challenges. Thereby, a clear appeal was made to the religious leaders and organizations for their active involvement in the implementation of the Agenda 2030 and the SDG in their communities, at their own rates and in mutual cooperation. But long before this call was made, religious leaders had launched various initiatives to protect the environment. It is important to note that religious leaders were among the early community organizers who initiated collective efforts on forest conservation, long before the role of forests in climate change mitigation was acknowledged. Hence, as expected, this appeal was immediately supported by religious leaders worldwide, whereby in September 2015 in Bristol, faith leaders, representing 24 belief traditions from around the world, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and Shintoism, declared their support in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNEP, 2016). In addition, on 28 November 2015, at COP21 in Paris (few days before adoption of the Paris Agreement), religious leaders and representatives of faith-based organizations participated in an interfaith event for climate justice. At this event, declarations for climate justice were submitted, signed by more than 1.7 million people, demanding a fair and ambitious climate deal at the forthcoming United Nations climate summit (CIDSE, 2015).

This was followed by the initiative of 33 religious leaders, who in support of the 22nd Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in November 2016 presented the "COP22 Interfaith Statement", in which faith communities call on their followers, individually and collectively, to "act on the reality of the climate crisis" (COP22, 2016).

2. No Poverty – Zero Hunger

Considering the scope of SDGs, the focus of the analysis in this paper is directed towards the first two goals:

- No poverty – to end poverty in all its forms everywhere. It envisions the eradication of extreme poverty, as well as the implementation of appropriate social protection systems and measures for all people, with special emphasis on the poorest and most vulnerable. In order to encourage active participation, this goal also envisages the provision of equal rights and access to economic resources, basic services, natural resources, as well as ownership and control over land and other forms of property, technology and financial services. In addition, it stands for supporting of communities exposed to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters. Finally, emphasizes the need to create sound political frameworks at national, regional and international levels, as well as mobilization of resources as crucial processes to support poverty eradication actions (UNDP, 2015).
- Zero hunger – to end hunger and all forms of malnutrition, and to ensure access, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food. Achieving this goal implies promotion of sustainable agriculture practices that increase productivity and production, as well as strengthen the capacity for adaptation to climate change and disasters. Thereby, it is necessary to increase investment in rural infrastructure, agricultural research, extension services and technology development. However, food security and improved nutrition will be unattainable if trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets are not corrected and prevented. It is therefore necessary for policy makers to ensure the proper functioning of food markets and to facilitate timely access to market information (UNDP, 2015).

The relevance and justification for setting these two goals for this study, arises from several findings regarding the current situation in Macedonia. The analysis of the State Statistics Office of the Republic of North Macedonia (STAT, 2019) from 2019, on the indicators for monitoring the level of achievement of SDGs, states that 41.6% of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Also, 22.2% of the population lives in income poverty, while 31.1% of the population is materially deprived. Furthermore, 14.3% of the population lives in poor dwelling conditions, and 24% of the population is unable to keep their home adequately warm.

According to the analysis of the World Population Review for 2020 (World Population Review, 2021), measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and complemented by Gross National Income (GNI) per capita (which gives a better indication of how that nation's individual citizens are faring), Macedonia ranks sixth in terms of poverty in Europe.

As for the connection between the activities of religious communities and achievement of these two goals, there are a number of findings throughout history. Regarding this connection, Emma Tomalin points out that: "religious traditions have always played a central role in supporting those experiencing poverty, through service delivery as well as the provision

of spiritual resources that provide mechanisms for resilience at both the individual and community level.” (Tomalin, 2018). In doing so, she clarifies that sometimes such activities involve those who are motivated by their religion to help other members of their religious community, but religious practitioners also often give their support to those of other religions. A brief overview of the history of religious communities’ involvement in humanitarian work is provided by Elizabeth Ferris, who states that:” long before international humanitarian law was formalized in treaty law, individuals and faith communities provided assistance to those afflicted by natural disaster, persecution, uprooting and war. The theme of justice for the poor, the marginalized and the alien is central to the Hebrew scriptures. The persecuted often sought sanctuary in temples and cities of refuge and, in the later medieval period, monasteries were often places of refuge and hospitality for strangers. Catholic orders were established to provide charity to the poor, medical care to the sick, education for children and hospitality to strangers. In the Orthodox and Protestant traditions, a special category of lay ministry, the diaconate was established to carry out Christian service (Greek word *diakonia*) which continues to be viewed as central to the mission of the church. This service to others was based not only on Christian values of charity and mercy but was also rooted in the belief in the absolute value of the human person” (Ferris, 2005).

As an adjunct in clarifying the nature of the relationship between religion and global efforts to achieve these goals, we enclose Tomalin’s analysis of the three phases of religion-development engagement (Tomalin, 2018). Explaining these phases, she states that they are not clear-cut phases, and there is overlap between them. But their significance is reflected in the identification of the shifting engagement between religions and global development institutions over time, as well as in depicting of the religious roots of the modern secular Western development project. In the first phase, which Tomalin calls the ‘pre-secular’ or the ‘integrated phase’, which is during the colonial era, religion and poverty reduction were intimately entwined. Thereby, faith actors had a more central and recognized role in social welfare and poverty reduction in contrast to the role they have played since the mid-20th century. According to Tomalin, contemporary global development project is a legacy of this, and therefore has a religious roots that are now obscured.

The post-World War II period was marked by the rise of secularism in the Global North and the diminishing influence that religious values and sources of authority have on individuals and the state. This situation, according to Tomalin, heralds the second phase, which she calls the ‘secular’ or the ‘fragmented’ phase. This phase refers to the era of the global development industry which is based on the normative secularist position that modernization will lead to secularization. In doing so, the role that different religious traditions continued to play in local development was marginalized. This phase is followed by the third phase, which is characterized by the ‘turn to religion’ from the early 2000s. According to Tomalin, the revitalization of religion has led to a greater voice for faith actors in public development debates and initiatives, and an ‘apparent turn to religion’ by global development actors. In doing so, she points out that since the early 2000s there has been a marked increase in interest from secular global development institutions, including development donors and NGOs, in funding and working with faith actors around poverty reduction (Tomalin, 2018).

Given the religious affiliation of the majority of the population in Macedonia, this paper covered the two largest religious communities, the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Religious Community.

3. Position and activities of religious communities in Macedonia after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had a specific reflection on the religious life of faithful all over the world, and consequently on the religious life in Macedonia. In our previous papers on this topic (Blazhevski, 2021, Gjorgjevski, 2021), it was noticed that despite the introduction of numerous restrictive measures for prevention and protection against the spread of coronavirus, which in many cases, were contrary to the religious practices of religious communities, they clearly and unequivocally support the measures. Given the specific circumstances that the crisis arose in time just before and during the major Christian and Islamic holidays, the larger religious communities in Macedonia mainly adhered to the state decisions for dealing with the crisis. In doing so, most of the festive services were held only by the clergy, while the usual public holiday gatherings were hindered, as well as family and private holiday visits and gatherings. It was also noted that apart from the joint statement from the meeting of the heads of churches and religious communities in Macedonia, initiated by the director of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups just before New Year's Eve, neither before nor after this statement were there any other joint statements (Blazhevski, 2021).

In the aforementioned papers, we also analyzed the representation and position of the media regarding religious communities that is religious practices since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, special attention was given to the situation in social media, given that health epidemics typically generate bursts of attention on social media. In doing so, it was pointed out that: "that the religious element was heavily exploited in the media and the public, highlighting manifestations of anti-religious intolerance stemming from non-religious circles. This tendency was transmitted on social media, to which religious communities reacted with short statements, or there was no reaction at all. But these reactions, as well as the amended and corrected statements by religious communities, were not sufficiently represented in the media" (Gjorgjevski, 2021).

4. Empirical research

4.1. Methodological approach

In terms of research methods, this research is a qualitative study with thematic analysis of responses from semi-structured interviews. The justification and relevance of the chosen methodological approach to this topic is also emphasized by Bryman, who points out that:

“qualitative research tries to observe social life in terms of processes” (Bryman, 2012). The research design in this project is cross-sectional, whereby the collection of empirical records took place in a precisely determined time interval, from September 10 to November 15, 2021. In this study, we used an on-line individual interview as a method for collecting empirical data. The sample was purposefully stratified and the respondents from the religious collectivities were persons who have completed a higher theological education. Also, within the religious community to which the respondents belonged, they held a position from which they had insight into humanitarian activities and initiatives, or were directly involved in some of them. The prepared interview was sent by e-mail to approximately 25 representatives of religious collectivities. Only 15 respondents completed the interview and returned it to the research team. Accordingly, the research sample was composed of 15 respondents.

The basics of the interview was explained to the potential respondents in the e-mail which was sent to them, as well as in the interview. The interviewees were previously informed on the basic information about the project and the interview, and they were asked for informative consent for interviewing, which was obtained. All interviewed persons were guaranteed anonymity, as well as adequate protection of the information and views expressed in the answers, and of course their keeping, processing, and interpretation or presentation.

4.2. Data analysis

After the data collection, a thematic analysis of the interview responses was performed, which was aimed at generating data themes. The approach used in the data analysis was inductive, with categories and themes derived from the interviews. In doing so, the qualitative analysis of the selected questions focused on interpreting the responses of the interviewees. Thereby, from the thematic analysis of the data, the following themes have been defined: Orientation of humanitarian activities towards all citizens; Aggravated organization of humanitarian activities; Supporting greater engagement of religious communities in the implementation of SDGs; Posting on social media vs. turning to traditional media about the activities of religious communities; and Moral education of young people.

The analysis of the mentioned topics that arose from the indicated questions was in accordance with the established goals of this study for contextual consideration and understanding of the mentioned topics (Bryman, 2012). Additionally, the quotations of the respondents were used as: proof of their views, better understanding of the key concepts, illustration, and they are in function of the findings and conclusions of this paper. In certain categories, there is saturation or repetition to some extent, which was noticeable during the stratification of the answers. Also, despite the presentation of the themes as discrete, there is overlap between them.

5. Thematic analysis of empirical materials

5.1. Orientation of humanitarian activities towards all citizens

The formation of this topic was imposed by the answers of the respondents regarding the humanitarian activities of the religious communities to which they belong. Although none of the questions asked the respondents about the selectivity in humanitarian activities, that is whether the humanitarian activities of their religious communities were aimed exclusively at believers. The answers of the respondents immediately emphasize that the humanitarian activities are aimed at all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation: "The humanitarian activities initiated by our religious community refer to: help to poor families, people in need, orphans, regardless of their religious affiliation." (9); "The Islamic religious community organizes humanitarian activity for all citizens, regardless of their religious and ethnic affiliation" (4); "In accordance with the great desire and enthusiasm of our Metropolitan, everyone who turned to us or who we had heard needed help was helped" (12)

Also, this orientation of humanitarian activities was emphasized on the issues that referred to the period before, as well as to the period after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic: "We have a great tradition and strong desire to help the poor" (2); "The Macedonian Orthodox Church has always cared for its faithful children, but also for all those who have asked for help"(10).

The emphasis on this orientation of the humanitarian activities of the religious communities was noted in almost all respondents. Also, they maintained this orientation in the future, regardless of the course of the COVID-19 pandemic: "... daily financial assistance for the poor has been established, which is our permanent commitment" (7); "All temples throughout the diocese constantly respond to requests for help from: poor, sick, old and frail people, people with disabilities, but also people with addictions"(3).

5.2. Aggravated organization of humanitarian activities

The introduction of a number of restrictive measures to prevent and protect against the spread of coronavirus has necessitated the need for religious communities to adapt to these measures and protocols. This was followed by a period of adaptation to protocols and protection measures, as well as reorganization of the humanitarian activities of the religious communities: "We adapted to the circumstances and recommendations of the institutions and there was no delay in humanitarian activities" (1). In doing so, most of the respondents state that they faced difficulties after the introduction of the initial protocols and measures for protection: "There was a change, in terms of the way the humanitarian activity was organized, due to the observance of the anti-Covid 19 measures" (15). This has also led to a decrease in the intensity of humanitarian activities at the beginning of the pandemic: "The new conditions and measures led to a change in the dynamics of the implementation of activities." (10).

However, the respondents point out that this did not cause any delay in any of the previously initiated humanitarian activities. In addition, partial initiatives were launched for the provision of protection equipment.” The only change occurred in the part of our donation for the needs of the hospital, with the supply of medical material for protection from COVID-19. All other activities, as far as I know, were carried out, perhaps only with less intensity.” (6).

Most of the respondents state that the new situation with the coronavirus pandemic did not reduce the response of the believers to the humanitarian activities. Although, the restrictive measures and the ban on the movement of citizens during 2020, reduced the opportunities for their active participation.” All the believers who helped before the pandemic, continued to participate in all activities” (8); “The response was at the same level as before, but due to the measures, the engagement was reduced.” (11).

5.3. Supporting greater engagement of religious communities in the implementation of SDGs

In the analysis of the answers, the respondents were united by the position of support for greater engagement of religious communities in the implementation of SDGs:” They need to engage much more and initiate cooperation with all interested parties” (5); “They need to be more engaged, but we do not have the opportunities and sufficient knowledge for that.” (13). In addition, for some of the activities, the respondents listed their religious communities as bearers, while for some of the activities, they propose the inclusion of religious communities with appropriate assistance, while the bearers would be the state institutions:” ...assistance from state institutions is needed” (2); “Coordination and professional support by state institutions is needed” (12).

Some of the respondents, in addition to helping reduce hunger and poverty, point to other areas of SDGs in which they could provide adequate support. The most commonly mentioned areas are: nature protection, health protection, education, care for the well-being of people:” Religious communities as Divine institutions, in which the people have more confidence, should be more engaged in the processes of sustainable development. As influential institutions, religious communities should be engaged in other activities related to the SDGs (not only in reducing hunger and poverty), but especially in educational processes, in nature protection, in the preservation of health, in respecting and caring for people, because all these principles are already contained in the teachings of the faith as the highest principles, as a relation to God’s creation.” (14).

A small number of respondents, despite the clearly emphasized support, when asked about the key humanitarian activities in which their religious community could be involved, some of the respondents did not state a specific activity or area. However, they state that this stems from the insufficient knowledge and experience in all segments of this issue. Therefore, they point to the support from state institutions, that is cooperation with appropriate staff who have knowledge and years of experience in this issue:” Construction of housing for the

poor, construction of kitchens specifically for the poor as Objectives to be taken by state institutions, where religious communities would help with their contribution.” (3).

5.4. Posting on social media vs. turning to traditional media about the activities of religious communities

The need for analysis of reporting on humanitarian activities of religious communities arose from the findings of the analysis of the position and activities of religious communities after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic (Blazhevski, 2021). In these analyzes, the reflections on the public opinion regarding the position and activities of the religious communities were also considered. In addition, it was pointed out that the religious element was heavily exploited in the media and the public, highlighting manifestations of anti-religious intolerance stemming from non-religious circles. This tendency was transmitted on social media, although public interest in religious practices has drastically decreased over time. The access of the media has a great impact on the acceptance and support of humanitarian activities of religious communities by citizens. It would also affect the motivation of religious communities to continue and expand the spectrum of humanitarian initiatives.

During the analysis of the answers of the respondents, three groups of answers were formed, ie three different approaches of the religious communities regarding the reporting of their humanitarian activities.

Most of the respondents stated that they did not notify the traditional media, but posted on social media about the humanitarian activities of their religious communities. The most common were the posts on Facebook, while at the same time, the posts on their websites followed:” It was only posted on social media” (9); “As for all other activities, it was posted on social media, that is on our Facebook page” (7); “It was posted on our website and on the FB page of our diocese” (6).

A small number of religious communities, in addition to posting on social media and their websites, have reported on their humanitarian activities to some of the traditional media, especially to television stations. Most of them submitted notifications to the local media, for which they expressed interest. While the initiative towards the larger national media was generally absent, as well as the interest on their part:” We were covered by the media only by the local media: Radio and Television Kiss and the website Tetovo info” (11); “Notification was sent to all media that were interested in our activities” (4). Characteristic of all these respondents is the impression that the media reported correctly and impartially regarding their humanitarian activities:” They reported impartially and truthfully” (11); “I consider that the reporting was correct and professional” (15).

Very few respondents stated that they did not submit a notification on the humanitarian activities of their religious communities to any of the traditional media, nor did they post on social media about these activities. In doing so, none of the respondents gave a specific

reason for such an approach: “No, we did not inform the media” (1); “We did not submit any notification on the activities to the media, nor was it posted on any of the social media” (8).

5.5. Moral education of young people

Similar to the topic of the orientation of humanitarian actions, this topic arose from the space in the questionnaire provided for a question or topic that was not listed, but the respondents consider it relevant and would like to express their opinion. The position towards the need for moral education of young people prevails among most of the respondents, and some of them state these thoughts in the context of the answers to some of the questions. Thereby, this position prevails among the respondents who, in addition to reducing poverty and hunger, point out specific areas of SDGs in which they could provide adequate support.

In doing so, they build on this attitude, emphasizing the impact of education on raising environmental awareness. Here they emphasize the positive benefits of getting acquainted with religious teachings, pointing out that young people through them would be formed into personalities who will have respect for people and nature:” Islamic teaching commands and demands peace, mutual assistance and solidarity, hospitality, mercy and other high values.’(4); “The Church will never teach children to disrespect their neighbors, or nature” (14).

Also, the majority of respondents point out the neglect of moral dimension in education, emphasizing the essential connection between religion and morality, and recognition of fundamental beliefs and moral values in religion as a strong incentive in rising of environmental awareness:” The church can only give children a good moral foundation, the foundation of which will be love, and when children have a sound basis, it is much easier to build themselves into healthy and reasonable people, who will always act according to the moral Christian principles in relation to each of God’s creations.” (5); “I will concentrate my opinion on this issue at one point, which I think is of the utmost importance nowadays in complete moral erosion. That is the education. I think it is difficult to change older people, although it is not impossible, but it is still better to prevent than to treat (as the saying goes). If we all work together, of course the pedagogues, the ecclesiastical persons and the parents in general, then we can say with confidence that this region of ours will bear good fruits, which, in turn, will contribute to many things in all aspects of our lives, including the achievement of SDGs.” (13).

6. Conclusion

Today’s challenges facing humanity, such as poverty, climate change, clean energy and pollution will not be solved only through a reliance on technology and science, even if they were equitably available to all communities. Religion is important determinant of human behavior, behavioral change and moral responsibility. Agenda 2030 provides a

framework for broad cooperation with stakeholders in various social spheres. Furthermore, it is recommended more active involvement of religious leaders and organizations in the implementation of the Agenda 2030, that is the achievement of sustainable development goals. This perception is supported in a number of official strategies and documents, which recognize that religious principles also encourage caregiving and donation to the poor and the needy as an essential obligation of those who possess a minimum level of wealth. In doing so, these reports particularly emphasize that religious communities can significantly contribute to ending extreme poverty, leaving no one behind when addressing multi-dimensional poverty and related challenges such as youth and minorities, and access for all to basic services.

All religions recognize in one way or the other that poverty, exclusion and discrimination are social, humanitarian, and security issues. The primary message of Christianity and Islam is a call for improvement and integration of the poor into society and elimination of all obstacles and inequalities for full individual development. But, The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound effect on religion and believers. The interaction between religious traditions, religious freedom and responsibilities in public health is complex, intertwining the cultural and legal dimensions of social reality. The 'new normal' also affected humanitarian activities organized by religious communities.

The analysis of the answers, confirms that introduction of a number of restrictive measures to prevent and protect against the spread of coronavirus caused difficulties in organization of the humanitarian activities of the religious communities. This led to a decrease in the intensity of humanitarian activities at the beginning of the pandemic. However, this did not cause any delay in any of the previously initiated humanitarian activities, nor did it reduce the response of the believers to the humanitarian activities.

According to the presented answers it can be seen that humanitarian activities of the religious communities were not aimed exclusively at believers, that is almost all respondents emphasize that these activities were aimed at all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation. Also, this orientation of humanitarian activities was emphasized on the issues that referred to the period before, as well as to the period after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the answers processed it can be concluded that according to the majority of the respondents, religious communities support their greater engagement in the implementation of SDGs. Among the most commonly mentioned areas are: nature protection, health protection, education, and care for the well-being of people. This position is followed by the emphasis on the need for moral education of young people. Thereby, positive benefits of getting acquainted with religious teachings are highlighted, as a strong incentive to raise environmental awareness.

From the analysis of the empirical evidence it can also be concluded that the use of social media is becoming more prevalent in religious communities, despite the impression of the respondents that the traditional media reported correctly and impartially regarding their humanitarian activities.

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