

# GNRC SIXTH FORUM

## THE CHILD IS CALLING:

### Interfaith Cooperation to Build a Hopeful World for Children

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

[Arigatou International](#) will convene the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) Sixth Forum from 19 to 21 November 2024 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. As the GNRC approaches a quarter-century of interfaith collaboration, action, and dialogue in the service of children around the world, the Sixth Forum is a pivotal moment for members to reflect on and celebrate the successes and positive transformations achieved since the Network was inaugurated in 2000 at its first Forum.

Hosted by the [Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities](#) (IAFSC), the upcoming Forum will bring together leaders of diverse faith and spiritual traditions, representatives from various governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental organizations, and children (who will have met in advance for a three-day forum to prepare for their participation at the main Forum). The Sixth Forum will be a hybrid event. In addition to the 400-600 in-person attendees, another 600 participants are expected to attend virtually. The participants will share ideas and formulate concrete strategies and plans for a hopeful world for, and with, children.

#### 2. THE GLOBAL CONTEXT FOR CHILDREN

The GNRC Sixth Forum takes place as children around the world are facing infringement of their basic rights on multiple fronts. Violent conflict in DR Congo, Ethiopia, Iraq, Israel and Palestine, Myanmar, Niger, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, and other places has taken the lives and shattered the dreams of hundreds of thousands of children in the last year alone.

Over 460 million children are living in conflict zones.<sup>1</sup> They face not only imminent danger to their lives but also a highly uncertain future with the trust between them and the systems that should nurture them at breaking point or having broken already. The current global disregard for the sanctity and inherent dignity of human life, along with our collective violation of the sacred trust we have as guardians of future generations, represent deeply troubling desecrations of the shared values that lie at the bedrock of all our faiths.

The GNRC Sixth Forum also takes place in the aftermath of a global pandemic, and amidst ongoing energy, food, economic and climate crises that pose unprecedented challenges for the most vulnerable: children. With 47 percent of children already severely deprived before COVID-19, the pandemic pushed an additional 150 million children into multidimensional poverty.<sup>2</sup> Alongside this, the number of displaced children is at an historic high. According to UNICEF, at the end of 2022, 43.3 million children had been displaced due to violent conflict

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-executive-director-catherine-russell-remarks-launch-unicefs-2024-humanitarian>

<sup>2</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/resources/impact-of-covid-19-on-multidimensional-child-poverty/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/number-displaced-children-reaches-new-high-433-million>

<sup>4</sup> The new, intensified or protracted wars and conflicts also included those in the [Sudan](#) - 3.3 million; [Ukraine](#) - 1 million; [DR Congo](#) - 2.8 million; [Israel/Gaza](#) - 893,000; Syria - 3.75 million; Iraq - 649,000; among others, bringing the total number of displaced children to an estimated 51.2 million by January 2024.

and poverty-triggered migrations.<sup>3</sup> By January 2024, that number had grown dramatically to 51.2 million — the steepest rise ever seen in one year due to the sharp increase of new conflicts and intensification of existing wars.<sup>4</sup> Even in supposedly “normal,” stable, and peaceful settings, children confront a silent emergency of extreme poverty, inequality, abuse, and exploitation, some of it in the name of religion. Gender-based discrimination, especially affecting girls, or harmful traditional practices such as the continuing prevalence of child marriage and female genital mutilation and cutting are examples of harmful practices that faith communities have a special role in preventing.

In the Middle East region, where the Sixth Forum will be taking place, the recent escalation of Israeli-Palestinian conflict has, yet again, brought about unfathomable devastation. As at the end of April 2024, the October 7, 2023 attacks and their aftermath had taken the lives of over 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals,<sup>5</sup> and nearly 34,500 Palestinians including over 14,000 children in Gaza.<sup>6</sup> One million Palestinian children in Gaza have been displaced and are facing starvation.<sup>7</sup> Within the same region, over 2.2 million Yemeni children under the age of five are acutely malnourished — one of the highest rates in the world.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these extremely concerning trends, hope is still the right choice, the only choice, and a credible choice. We live in a time of great innovation and advancement. By leveraging these advancements, fostering dialogue and cooperation between faiths and across generations, and joining hands to address the evils of our age, we not only *can* but *must* rebuild trust and repair broken pathways to forge a safe, secure, and sustainable world.

### 3. OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of the Forum is to bring together GNRC members, diverse religious leaders, children, youth, policymakers, academics, representatives from child-focused NGOs, and members of faith communities to deliberate, collaborate, exchange best practices, and forge new action commitments to address global issues concerning children.

Specifically, the Forum aims to:

- a) Provide a space for authentic and effective collaboration between and among children and adults from diverse regions and religions.
- b) Put a spotlight on the critical situation of the world's children and reaffirm our commitment to addressing these present-day realities in the spirit of the GNRC.
- c) Demonstrate the unique contributions, as well as clear and tangible actions, that religious communities and their ethical values can make to address the challenges children face.
- d) Build upon the transformative agenda, initiatives, actions, and expertise of Forum participants to shape new collaborative action for, and with, children.
- e) Strengthen the GNRC and celebrate nearly 25 years of interfaith cooperation.
- f) Formulate and commit to concrete strategies and actions, build synergies, and develop new strategic partnerships that will support the scaling up of key programs for children.
- g) Launch the GNRC Strategic Plan for 2025 – 2030.

<sup>5</sup> UN OCHA Flash Update as at March 8, 2024: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-135>

<sup>6</sup> UN OCHA Flash Update #159, April 29, 2024: <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-159-enarhe>

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNWRA), <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-62-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/yemen-emergency>

#### 4. THEMES AND FOCUS AREAS

The overall theme of the Forum, *The Child is Calling: Interfaith Cooperation to Build a Hopeful World for Children*, aims to ensure that the Forum is relevant, addresses current issues, and that the focus is fixed on eliciting hope and authentic participation from children in building a better world. *The child is calling* conveys the heart of what brings people together for the GNRC Sixth Forum and focuses us on answering the call of the child with concrete actions.

To guide us in answering this call, the Sixth Forum will be organized around three running themes. These are, building a *safe* world with children; building a *secure* world with children; and building a *sustainable* world with children.

Under *building a safe world*, the Forum will address three focus areas. These will include the dignity of the child in the digital world; the vital role of families and collaborative communities; and pathways to building resilience and strengthening mental health in the face of global shocks, emerging crises, and pandemics.

Under *building a secure world*, the Forum will address four focus areas. These are the root causes of conflicts, wars, xenophobia, hate crimes, and extremism; stakeholder participation in building resilience to conflict; the impact of conflict and war on children; and building a peaceful and inclusive world for, and with, children.

Under *building a sustainable world*, the Forum will address four focus areas. These are responsible lifestyles; hunger, child poverty, and inequality; ethical values and education for sustainable development; and climate-conscious stewardship.

The Forum program will include plenary sessions, panel and group discussions for the different themes and focus areas, expert presentations, video presentations, reflections, and an interfaith prayer for peace. Children will be full participants throughout. Recommendations and post-forum actions from the GNRC Sixth Forum will be adopted and issued through a call to action: the Abu Dhabi Declaration titled “*Answering the Call of the Child*”, and a new GNRC Strategic Plan that will guide the work of the GNRC over the following five years.

#### 5. ORGANIZATION AND APPROACHES

Arigatou International has established the GNRC Sixth Forum International Organizing Committee (IOC) to advise and guide on the design, themes, sub-themes, and structure of the Forum, its convening, and follow-up to the Abu Dhabi Declaration.

A Forum Steering Committee guides the Forum Secretariat, which in turn oversees implementation. To ensure that the views of children are front and center in the Forum design, discussions, and proceedings, a Children’s Advisory Group has been created. The IOC is also guided by specially invited senior advisors who provide advice when called upon.

#### 6. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The Forum is expected to result in:

- a) Enhanced mutual understanding, shared values, and collaboration among GNRC members and other participants;
- b) Enhanced adaptive capacity to advocate for the rights and well-being of children;
- c) Increased commitment to the implementation of the SDGs at the grassroots level;
- d) New strategic partnerships developed to support the scaling up of key programs to address the needs of children;

- e) Enhanced appreciation of the achievements and impact of nearly 25 years of grassroots interfaith cooperation;
- f) Enhanced outreach and visibility of Arigatou International from global to grassroots levels;
- g) Launch of the GNRC Strategic Plan for 2025 – 2030; and
- h) Adoption of the Abu Dhabi Declaration: *Answering the Call of the Child*.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Now, more than ever, as the world is gripped by crisis and uncertainty, children need hope for the future. They need a world where they can grow and thrive without fear or limitation, regardless of their faith, cultural, racial, economic, or social backgrounds. The GNRC Sixth Forum presents a tremendous opportunity to harness the growing leadership of our children and young people, strengthen our partnerships, build synergies, and co-create solutions for a better world with and for all the world's children.

The child is calling! We have a moral and ethical imperative to answer to this call. Now is the time to unite our efforts, intensify our actions, and put the voice of the child at the center as we come together to build a safe, secure, sustainable, and hopeful world for all.

## ABOUT THE PARTNERS



[Arigatou International](#) is “All for Children” and works with people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds to build a better world for children. Believing that every girl and boy is a precious treasure of humanity, Arigatou International draws on universal principles of the common good found in religious and spiritual traditions and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Arigatou International employs interfaith and intercultural approaches to promote children’s rights and well-being, seeking to bring about positive change at all levels – from the grassroots to global.



[Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities](#) is a network of advocates from civil society and faith communities. Its goal is to empower faith leaders to work for the safety and security of our communities, tackling issues such as child sexual abuse, hate crimes, child dignity in the digital world, extremism and radicalization, and human trafficking. It aims to facilitate the building of bridges between faiths, NGOs, governments, and experts in various domains and empower faith leaders, both at the institutional and grassroots levels, with knowledge and to mobilize them to play an active role in community safety.