

ACT Alliance Assembly Message: Hope in action - putting people first!

Preamble: The signs of the times and our vision for a better world

This is the message of the 3rd General Assembly of the ACT Alliance. Our global social, economic and political environment is changing, and our global context is ever more volatile, uncertain, and complex, with increased polarization, populism, occupation and violence in regions. This poses challenges and opportunities for ACT Alliance to play a meaningful role in fostering a just and inclusive world. In taking stock, some of the most salient issues that we witness include deteriorating human rights situations and shrinking space for civil society, including religious actors, the need for a fundamental shift in the humanitarian system, the necessity of global solidarity and more not less multilateral collaboration, ecumenical and interfaith cooperation, the protection of people on the move, the struggle against regression on issues of gender justice, the support of non-violent conflict transformation and conflict prevention, and the fight for climate justice and the integrity of God's creation.

We reaffirm our identity as an alliance of churches and affiliated organisations, charged with the responsibility to serve people and communities affected by crises, poverty and injustice. We do this from our Christian faith perspective and as a moral and ethical imperative as God calls us to do justice, to love mercy, to love our neighbours and to disciple all nations. At this 3rd Assembly, we as members of the ACT Alliance issue this statement as a sign of our prophetic calling and reflection, an urgent call for action and commitment to addressing these pressing issues of our time.

Our commitments and call for action

a. Human rights, human dignity and Human Rights Based Approach

Every person is created in the image of God endowed with full value inherent in being God's creation and for the purpose of flourishing. Included in this is an inalienable right to a life of dignity and to all rights as enshrined in the International Bill of Human Rights. Therefore, we are extremely alarmed that the validity of human rights as such, as well as of the international human rights system and mechanisms is systematically being questioned, disrespected and weakened by many actors.

In many countries, policies have provoked shrinking space for organized civil society, including faith actors, and violations of human rights. Governments have enforced measures such as restrictions regarding actions of CSOs, imposing legal and financial restrictions and limiting the freedom of association, expression, assembly and freedom of religion. There is a clear trend of persecutions and attacks against human rights defenders and community leaders that are defending the rights of their communities.

We commit to adhering to the fundamental principles of a human rights-based approach, ensuring participation, non-discrimination, empowerment and legality, and to be fully accountable and transparent in our work.

We commit to map out ACT Alliance's existing commitments to disability inclusion and identify the experience of the alliance on disability inclusion to enable comprehensive understanding across the alliance and develop policy guidelines to achieve the goals set for the alliance in its Global Strategy and the Sustainable Development Goals.

We call upon governments to protect, defend and fulfil their human rights obligations, including international humanitarian law.

We call on governments to respect human rights and to reverse policies, laws, and practices that hinder civil society organisations and peoples' movements, including human rights organisations, from their work. We further call on governments to adhere to the commitments they made in the Nairobi Outcome Document of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation, which recognized shrinking civil society space as a risk for development and further supported the important role of civil society in development.

We call upon governments to step up and immediately take action to protect, defend and guarantee the safety of human rights defenders and community leaders fighting for justice, and for their land, families and their own safety. Persecution, threats, intimidation, defamation and extrajudicial killings must immediately stop.

b. Emergency preparedness and humanitarian response

We are concerned that greater investment in local humanitarian capacity and leadership is needed if the humanitarian and resilience challenges of the 21st century are to be met. We call for a re-designed humanitarian system which puts local actors, including affected populations, at the centre of humanitarian action.

We stress that crisis-affected communities are always the first and often the most significant responders when disaster strikes; but that external emergency aid overlooks the potential for communities to lead their own crisis responses. We call for international and local humanitarian actors to support survivor and community-led approaches to crisis response.

We underline that when state institutions collapse, people rely on traditional community structures, local faith leaders and religious institutions for meaning, security, courage, comfort and hope. Faith-based organisations are present even in hard to reach crisis-affected areas that may be physically impossible for external actors to access. We call upon the international community and donor governments to recognize and affirm faith-based organizations and local faith communities as unique stakeholders in humanitarian relief.

We reaffirm the commitments agreed at the World Humanitarian Summit and in the Grand Bargain and commit to focusing our Rapid Response Fund on national and local members; and to increase the proportion of our humanitarian spend that goes directly to Southern members and partners. We commit to work together to develop, test and learn from innovative survivor-led and community-led crisis response approaches.

As faith-based actors, we commit to use our position in communities to address psychosocial and spiritual needs in communities. We will use the reach of our network to raise disaster risk reduction awareness at grassroots level, and will increase the proportion of our humanitarian spending that is invested in resilience, disaster risk reduction and preparedness.

We call upon the humanitarian and development sectors to work in a more integrated way to address development and humanitarian needs in parallel and to ensure a coherent approach to reducing disaster risk and building resilience.

We call for flexibility in resource allocations in both the humanitarian and development sectors to facilitate this integration (nexus), but avoiding the use of humanitarian action for other purposes than saving lives and responding to humanitarian needs. We call on the international community to ensure that humanitarian work is based on the humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law.

c. Sustainable and transformational development

We affirm that the 2030 Agenda, its Sustainable Development Goals, and its underlying principles of universality, of leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first, of full realisation of human rights across all goals, and of the interconnectedness of social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development resonate with ACT Alliance's goal of transformational development towards a good life for all within the planetary boundaries that preserves the integrity of God's creation and human dignity.

We commit to promoting an integrated response across our humanitarian, development and advocacy work that leaves no one behind. As a global alliance, we commit to work together for more inclusive sustainable development and to challenge policies and practices which contribute to vulnerabilities, to the destruction of the environment, and which perpetuate inequalities. We will cooperate with various partners, inter alia organisations of the UN system, to work towards that.

Such an integral approach to sustainable and transformative development cannot be achieved alone, it requires global solidarity and multilateral cooperation. However, we take note of and deplore that the intergovernmental system is in many ways unfit for purpose to tackle some of the challenges of today's world. Yet we are convinced that unilateralism and "my country first" are no solutions to the essentially global nature of many challenges, in particular regarding sustainable and transformative development.

For the global goals to be achieved, resources and targeted efforts are needed to promote people living in vulnerability and poverty. Giving humanitarian and long-term aid will continue to play an important role, mainly in conflict areas, fragile states and low-income countries. Aid needs to honour international commitments, and to be transparent, accountable, long-term and predictable. It should use a human-rights based approach, be inclusive, commit to results for all and adhere to the principles set out in the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation.

We denounce the system, by which there is free movement of capital – but not of people, tax havens, the extreme exploitation of natural resources, the destruction of the environment and an increasing inequality and the concentration of wealth and resources in the hands of a few.

We therefore call upon all UN member states to maximise their efforts to realise the SDGs and all human rights, and to do so individually and jointly, through international cooperation based on international agreements.

d. Protection of people on the move

We affirm that human mobility has been a defining feature of human history since the very beginning, and migration has been a constitutive element in the shaping of people's destinies. At the same time, we decry the global increase in the number of people forced to move without adequate protection and the decrease

in solidarity, particularly in the Global North, and that the wealthier half of the world is coming up with ever more inventive ways of preventing the mobility of people living in poverty and persecution.

We note that the needs and rights of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are particularly badly-served by current international frameworks. We call upon the international community and other duty-bearers to give greater priority to IDPs in future agreements, funding and programmes.

We note that – whatever the forces driving people from their homes may be - the rights of uprooted people are inadequately protected, and those in need have insufficient access to justice. Our approach to migration and displacement views these issues as interconnected, and takes a holistic view of human mobility as encompassing the entire cycle of migration, and of displacement as rooted in various forms of injustice.

We therefore commit to facilitate more effective connections between the local, national, regional and global levels of our members’ and their constituencies’ engagement, without which the complex challenges of migration and displacement cannot be effectively addressed.

We call for governments to reverse immigration policies and practices that have or could result in the separation of children from their parents. We also urge national governments to ensure asylum, refugee and immigration policies are in line with human rights and human dignity.

We urge UN member states to individually and jointly, through international cooperation, address the adverse drivers of migration, and call for the creation of conditions for migration out of choice, not necessity. We stress the centrality of improving protection and access to justice for people on the move, especially protection of children, adolescents and women, of promoting rights-based policies on labour mobility, of defending migrants’ rights in all return procedures, and of promoting transparency and accountability, as well as the participation of refugees and migrants, and the CSOs and FBOs supporting them, in the implementation of the Global Compacts for Refugees and for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the 1951 Refugee Convention.

e. Gender justice

ACT Alliance strongly believes that all human beings are created in the image of God and have equal rights and responsibility towards people and all of God’s creation. We are therefore concerned by a rolling back of human rights, backlash towards women human rights defenders and shrinking civil society spaces that adversely affect women seeking to exercise their rights.

ACT Alliance understands gender justice as the equal enjoyment of human rights, opportunities, responsibilities, resources and rewards irrespective of gender or sex, including fundamental freedoms in the political, civil, economic, social and cultural fields of life. Gender justice ensures that all people have the power to shape societies, faith communities and their own lives.

We commit to addressing critically important areas of gender justice, including gender based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights,¹ economic empowerment, and representation and participation in all

¹ as defined in the ACT Gender Justice Policy, “sexual rights are the rights of all people to decide freely and responsibly on all aspects of their sexuality, including protecting and promoting their sexual health, being free from discrimination, coercion or violence in their sexual lives and in all sexual decisions, expecting and demanding equality, full consent, mutual respect and shared responsibility in sexual relationships. Reproductive health rights concerns the complete physical, mental and social well-being including the concerns of persons with disabilities (PWDs), in all matters related to the reproductive system including a satisfying and safe sex life, capacity to have children and, freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so.”

areas of church and wider society, ensuring no one is left behind. We commit to examining our own organisations and structures and to make them inclusive of women's leadership and to allocate budget for gender equality programmes. Our development, advocacy and humanitarian programmes will include a gender justice lens in all aspects of their planning and implementation.

We commit to uphold the rights of all human beings irrespective of their gender, giving greater attention and support to those where gender intersects with other areas of inequality and vulnerability.

We call on governments, civil society organizations, including churches, the ecumenical movement and other faith actors as influential advocates across church and wider society, to recognize and uphold gender justice and equality, as a priority and a pre-condition for sustainable development.

We call on governments, civil society organisations and the international community to develop policies and programs that promote gender equality at all levels, and to promote best practice and transformative gender equality programming.

f. Human security and promoting peace

We are deeply concerned that the world is affected by an array of profound and interconnected crises that proliferate war, violence, conflicts, weapons, human rights violations and economic inequalities. We note the negative impacts of these crises, including increased militarisation, on democracy as exemplified by the situation in regions such as Latin America, Asia/Pacific, Africa and the Middle East.

We commit to strive for peace with justice and human security. We will engage closely with National Councils of Churches, interfaith networks and civil society organisations to support or develop programmes and join other initiatives to prevent violence, including gender-based violence, by addressing the root causes of conflict and strengthening robustness to manage potential conflicts in the future.

ACT Alliance will support the strengthening of instruments for preventing violent conflicts, and join and enable the participation of its members and churches in peacebuilding, conflict transformation and reconciliation initiatives.

We call upon the international community to increase their efforts towards addressing and preventing violent conflicts multilaterally, and to ensuring that both women and men participate in decision-making processes, post-conflict reconstruction and transitional justice processes.

g. Climate justice

Climate change poses a significant threat to lives and livelihoods of communities all over the world, with people living in poverty and vulnerability in developing countries bearing the brunt of its impacts. We are concerned that the efforts of the international community to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, to build community resilience, and to provide financial support to enable climate action in developing countries are still insufficient and have not led to addressing climate change in a meaningful and adequate manner. Women are often more affected, exposed to higher risks and carry more burdens of the consequences of climate change. The lack of participation hinders women's contribution in decision making and policy making.

We commit to advocate and mobilise for climate and ecological justice. Our advocacy for climate justice will be at all levels and will seek to engage the voices of faith communities and faith leaders in the context of the implementation of the Paris Agreement. Our advocacy will foster policies and practices that reduce

vulnerability and increase resilience, while calling for increased allocation of resources from developed countries to support climate action in developing countries.

We further commit to environmental sustainability within our own institutions to ensure that our operations adhere to the highest standards of care for creation and stewardship. We shall use our humanitarian, development and advocacy mandate to respond and address the impacts of climate change in communities, particularly in supporting adaptation and addressing climate induced loss and damage.

We call on all governments to implement the Paris Agreement in a manner that is ambitious and equitable. We specifically call on developed countries, based on their contribution to climate change and their economic capabilities, to meet their commitments under the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC to provide financial resources and leadership in emissions reduction. All other countries, including emerging economies must also take action if we are to reverse the changes and achieve climate justice.

h. Collaboration, ecumenical and interfaith relationship and action

We reaffirm the identity of ACT Alliance as an ecumenical and diakonal network and therefore commit ourselves to service and unity within the ecumenical family. Through our humanitarian, development and advocacy work, we shall prioritize and support churches, councils of churches and other ecumenical organizations in their ministries.

We shall further endeavour to work with other faith-based organizations and networks, including interreligious platforms and initiatives. ACT Alliance will work together with and in support of civil society and in particular is protecting political and operational space for civil society.

We call on the ecumenical family to take deliberate and intentional steps towards deeper collaboration particularly in dialogue, shared reflection and joint initiatives towards responding to the challenges we face in our world today through our advocacy and programmes, in a spirit of ecumenical diakonia.

Our Hope in action: putting people first!

We affirm our commitment to protecting, defending and advocating for the human rights of all, the agency and dignity of all human beings, who are created in the image of God, and the integral nature of the human spirit, which includes the need to seek unity, solidarity and hope in the wake of the challenges of our times.

We recognise our role as faith actors to nurture hope, to fight fear and to put people at the centre, as an important part of our diakonia and ministry. We celebrate the successes that the ecumenical family, collectively and in the context of wider interfaith and civil society, has achieved and their contribution to social justice, the protection and support of people and communities affected by humanitarian crises, and the positive contribution of development aid towards extreme poverty eradication.

We affirm that ACT forums at regional, sub-regional and national levels are the best expression of our identity and working together as an alliance. We recognise the importance of strengthening ACT forums as a platform for all members, national and international, and to politically and financially investing in ACT forums to enable them to efficiently represent and do the work of the alliance at their level.

As an alliance, we are increasing our understanding and recognition of the contribution of youth to our work and ministries. We further recognise their unique capabilities, energy, and vulnerability as a result of increasing volatility in job markets, economies, and societies. We affirm the youth in our churches and

societies and commit to expand spaces within our alliance to enable their meaningful participation, including in leadership and decision making.

As ACT Alliance - the world's largest Protestant and Orthodox network of churches and agencies working in humanitarian relief, sustainable development, and advocacy - we commit to work together to support and put the most vulnerable people first. We commit to do so in partnership with each other, and with other actors, in accord with our values as Christians. As members from around the world, the North and South, we commit to speaking out against injustice and to fighting for climate justice, gender justice, the rights of people on the move, peace and human security, and protection of people affected by emergencies. As churches and agencies rooted in communities, we commit to ensure no one is left behind.