

Building an Alliance of Civilisations

Manuel Manonelles*

Introduction

With the recent nomination of Jorge Sampaio – former President of Portugal 1996-2006 and current Special Envoy of the Secretary-General to Stop Tuberculosis – the Alliance of Civilisations initiative, born in the year 2004 as a proposal from the Spanish Prime Minister José-Luís Rodríguez-Zapatero, has started its implementation phase.

Indeed, it was in September 2004, in his speech addressing the 59th General Assembly of the United Nations that Prime Minister Zapatero launched the idea of an Alliance of Civilisations for the first time and proposed to the Secretary General the creation of a High Level Group to push forward this initiative. This proposal was immediately seconded by Turkey, becoming the co-sponsor of the Alliance.

Following the proposal and after some months of consultations and preparations, the 15 July 2005 Kofi Annan announced the launch of the Alliance as a formal UN initiative. This was followed by further consultations, and finally the composition and *Terms of Reference* of the United Nations High Level Group for the Alliance of Civilisations were unveiled on 2 September of the same year.

The High Level Group and Its Process

Although when first announced the High Level Group (HLG) was composed by eighteen members, it was finally closed with twenty and the following composition based on a regional basis: Federico Mayor, Co-Chair, President of the Foundation for a Culture of Peace and former UNESCO Director General; Mehmet Aydin, Co-Chair, Minister of State of Turkey and

* Manuel Manonelles is currently Director of the delegation of the Foundation for a Culture of Peace in Barcelona, position that he has combined with the one of Special Advisor of the Co-Chair of the United Nations High Level Group for the Alliance of Civilisations from July 2005 until December 2006.

Professor of Theology; Seyed Mohamed Khatami, Former President of Iran and promoter of the Dialogue Among Civilizations process; H.H. Sheikha Mozah, Consort of the Emir of Qatar and Chairperson of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development; Mohamed Charfi, Former Minister of Education of Tunisia; Ismail Serageldin, President of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina; André Azoulay, Adviser to H.M. King Mohammed VI of Morocco; Moustapha Niasse, Former Prime Minister of Senegal; Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of Cape Town and Peace Nobel Prize Laureate; Hubert Vedrine, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of France; Karen Armstrong, Historian of Religion; Vitaly Naumkin, President of the International Centre for Strategic and Political Studies; John Esposito, Founding Director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at the Georgetown University; Rabbi Arthur Schneier, President of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation & Senior Rabbi, Park East Synagogue, New York; Enrique Iglesias, Ibero-American Secretary General and former President of the Inter-American Development Bank; Cândido Mendes, Secretary General of the Academy of the Latinity; Nafis Sadik, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary General; Shobana Bhartia, Managing Director of the «Hindustan Times», New Delhi; Ali Alatas, Former Foreign Minister of Indonesia; Pan Guang, Director and Professor of the Shanghai Academy of Sciences.

The *Terms of Reference* of the HLG were presented together with its composition, clearly stating:

The initiative responds to a broad consensus across nations, cultures and religions that all societies are interdependent, bound together in their development and security, and in their environmental, economic and financial well-being. The Alliance seeks to forge collective political will and to mobilise concerted action at the institutional and civil society levels to overcome the prejudice, misperceptions and polarisation that militate against such a consensus. And it hopes to contribute to a coalescing global movement which, reflecting the will of the vast majority of people, rejects extremism in any society.

[...]

Toward this end, the HLG will consider practical strategies:

– to strengthen mutual understanding, respect and shared values

- among different peoples, cultures and civilisations;
- to counter the influence of groups fomenting extremism and the exclusion of others who do not share their world views;
- to counter the threat to world peace and stability posed by extremism;
- to foster awareness in all societies that security is indivisible and it is vital need for all, and that global cooperation is an indispensable prerequisite for security, stability and development¹.

Support by the International Community

Before the first meeting of the HLG, the Alliance process received a strong endorsement by the international community, when it was explicitly welcomed in paragraph 144 of the Outcome Document of the World Summit on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the United Nations².

In the following months this support grew very rapidly with the creation of a *Group of Friends*³ in New York, which in November 2006 included more than thirty-five member states and four international organisations⁴; and by the large number of declarations and letters of support received from different international entities both governmental and not.

¹ *Terms of Reference for the High Level Group*. See www.unaoc.org.

² Which met in UN-New York in September 2005. See www.un.org/summit2005.

³ A *Group of Friends* is a usual practice both in the UN framework and in other international arenas by which the country which is sponsoring a particular international initiative – whereas it is Spain and Turkey at the Alliance of Civilisations process, Finland with the Helsinki Process, or Canada in the Responsibility to Protect – creates an informal group with those other member states supportive of the initiative to promote it, give support and content and ensure its advance in the agenda of the different intergovernmental bodies.

⁴ *Declarations and News Supportive of the Alliance of Civilisations* at www.unaoc.org/repository/support.pdf.

⁵ Of course this was not the case for those media groups which have as an *editorial rule* the discredit of any initiative taken by the UN.

⁶ Indeed the Office of the Co-Chair did make global press surveillance – during all the process of the HLG – which included a representative roster of newspapers from Arab and Islamic countries.

Work of the HLG, the Context of the Meetings and the Media

The HLG met in four plenary meetings: Palma de Mallorca (Spain), Qatar (Doha), Dakar (Senegal) and Istanbul (Turkey), plus an interim-working meeting that took place at UN headquarters in New York, early September 2006. These meetings were attended by the HLG members plus the special representatives of the Spanish and Turkish Prime Ministers, the Special Advisor to the Secretary General for the Alliance of Civilisations, the Special Advisors of both Co-Chairs, the Secretariat and some advisors depending on the nature and agenda of each meeting.

All the meetings had high levels of media coverage. Most of the time the relationship was constructive and the perception of the process was highly positive⁵, especially from a large number of Arab and media groups from Islamic countries⁶. But it was

the meeting in Doha, in the context of the *cartoons crisis* which put the HLG process under the strongest pressure, as it was a meeting in an Arab country and being the Alliance an initiative created precisely to avoid the kind of crisis that was taking place. In fact, the presence of the HLG and the fact that many of their members were interviewed on prime time in *Al-Jazeera* – which has its headquarters in Doha –, did help in launching a very strong message in a very turbulent context.

Interaction with the International Community and Civil Society

During the whole process, the Co-Chairs had a clear vision of the need to involve the whole international community even during its phases of conception and debate. Therefore, the highest representatives of several international organisations who had expressed their interest were invited to address the HLG. The Secretary General of the League of Arab States – Amre Moussa – and the Secretary General of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference – Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu – participated in the 2nd HLG meeting in Doha⁷; the Director General of UNESCO – Koichiro Matura –, the Secretary General of OSCE – Marc Perrin de Brichambaut – and the representative of the United Cities and Local Governments – Wim Deetman, Mayor of The Hague – did so in the 3rd HLG meeting in Dakar. Moreover, the two Co-Chairs, either individually or jointly presented the initiative in several meetings and gatherings, as they did at the Permanent Council of the OSCE in Vienna on 4 April 2006. In all these cases, it was clearly evidenced the interest for the initiative and the willingness of all these organisations to be active patterns in the implementation phase. In fact, the Alliance of Civilisations process gathered a vast and unusual support by states, international organisations and civil society organisations in a reduced space of time, specially taking into account that in many cases this support was given when only the general aspects of the initiative were known, that is, before the HLG report was presented⁸.

In order to be as inclusive as possible, the Office of the Co-Chair Federico Mayor organised several meetings, including

⁷ This meeting took place under the context of the so-called *cartoons crisis* and counted also with the participation of the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Spain – Miguel Ángel Moratinos – and Turkey – Abdullah Gül – and of the Prime Minister of Qatar – Sheik Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Tani; who met the day before of the meeting in a regional Summit making a strong call to address the crisis.

⁸ The compilation of documents of support to the Alliance – prepared by the Office of Co-Chair Federico Mayor – can be found under the title *Support to the Alliance of Civilisations. Compilation of Declarations and News Supportive of the Alliance of Civilisations* at the website of the Alliance of Civilisations initiative: www.unaoc.org or at the website of the Foundation for a Culture of Peace: www.fund-cultura.depoz.org/barcelona.

the *Hearings with the International Community and Civil Society* that took place at the Palais des Nations in Geneva on 17 July 2006, with the participation of more than forty representatives of international organisations of civil society⁹. It also participated in several international meetings and seminars by delegation of the Co-Chair, including the World Council of the United Cities and Local Governments¹⁰, where a formal support to the Alliance of this organisation was approved.

Although at the beginning of the process it was decided that several regional meetings would be organised in order to spread the debate in different cultural and social contexts, finally, only two could take place: one organised in Quito by the Office of Co-Chair – in collaboration with the Foundation Guayasamín – under the title *El Tiempo de la Alianza de Civilizaciones. Culturas Originarias*¹¹; and the other one in Saint Lucia, organised by the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in collaboration with the CARICOM Secretariat.

The Report

On 13 November 2006 the HLG report was presented to the Secretary General in a ceremony that took place in Istanbul, with the presence of the two sponsoring Prime Ministers and other authorities. As requested in its *Terms of Reference*, it was an *action-driven report*¹².

Divided in two parts, the first one is devoted to the political analysis and prescriptions. Indeed, it is structured in five chapters, including an introduction under the title of *Bridging the World's Divides*, followed by the chapter of the *Guiding Principles*, which roots the whole report in the best UN tradition – the Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the respect for International Humanitarian Law, the principles of interdependence, of diversity of cultures, democratic governance and the fight against injustice and poverty through the Millennium Development Goals. It also clearly states the rejection of terrorism and the core role of the UN system and rules in fighting it. It closes by enunciating the «critical role [religion can play] in promoting an appreciation of other cultures, religions, and ways of life to help build harmony among them». This chapter is followed by the ones

⁹ The report of this meeting can be found also at www.fund-culturadepaz.org/barcelona.

¹⁰ The World Council of the UCLG took place in Marrakesh on 30–31 October 2006, see www.cities-localgovernments.org.

¹¹ The report of this meeting can be found also at www.fund-culturadepaz.org/barcelona.

¹² The report can be consulted and downloaded in several languages at www.unaoc.org.

on the *The Global Context* and *The Political Dimension*, and ends with the *General Policy Recommendations*, subdivided in those addressing the issue of the Middle East and those with a more general but political scope; including:

[...]

- a renewed commitment to multilateralism;
- a full and consistent respect for international law and human rights;
- coordinated migration policies consistent with human rights standards;
- combating poverty and economic inequities;
- protection of the freedom of worship;
- exercising responsible leadership.

[...]

Part II is devoted to the four main fields of action – identified for this action-oriented report – and the specific recommendations for each field. It is divided in three parts – corresponding, respectively, to Chapters VI, VII and VIII of the report. The first one introduces the four *Main Fields of Action: Education, Youth, Migration and Media*. The second part addresses the specific recommendations for each of the field; and the third and final one proposes the way to implement the different recommendations.

In the case of the first main field of action, the report stresses:

Education in its various forms – including music, sports, art drama and film – can help build bridges between communities and people. Such broad perspectives encourage young people to steer away from the kind of exclusivist thinking which holds that one group's interest may be advanced at the expense of others or that one group's victimization justifies the victimization of others. Non-formal education can play a key mobilizing role in pursuit of these objectives¹³.

In the case of the second one:

[...] Student exchange programs, sports activities and political involvement can provide new opportunities for promoting crosscultural understanding and respect for diversity. Moreover, supporting young people's participation in decision making processes

¹³ Paragraph 6.3 of the HLG report.

can benefit society as a whole [...] it is extremely important to recognize youth not only as a source of mobilisation, but as autonomous actors and partners¹⁴.

When introducing the field of migration:

The dynamic dimension of migration: Virtually every state is both country of origin and of destination for migrants. [...] How this dynamic is portrayed in the media, discussed by political and cultural leaders, and managed by policy-makers will determine whether population view increased diversity as a source of strength or as a threat¹⁵.

And in the case of media:

The media in all its forms holds the potential to serve as a bridge between cultures and societies. [...] Yet, some of the strongest pressures in today's world – political control and market forces – hamper the production of both quality news and entertainment programming that present a well-balanced portrayal of foreign cultures. [...] Objective reporting and the presentation of a diversity of perspectives are needed to prevent stereotypes and misrepresentations from blocking the flow of reliable information¹⁶.

There is no need to say that the different proposals are too many to be described here, but I would like to highlight the following:

In the field of education: Those related with *civic, peace and crosscultural education*; massive *exchange programs, particularly at the post-graduate level*; the *role of non-formal education and participation* and *Media literacy education*.

In the field of youth: Those linked – again – with *exchange programs*, and the ones related with *expanding opportunities for youth mobilisation and participation*.

In the migration area: *The dynamic dimension of migration and proactive strategies for addressing it*; *supporting expanded inclusive dialogue at all levels* and the recommendations related with *exercising a responsible leadership*.

In the field of media: Recommendations on *press freedom and responsibility (codes of conduct)*; again *media literacy*; and *training and exchange programs for journalism*.

¹⁴ Paragraph 6.12 of the HLG report.

¹⁵ Paragraph 6.17 of the HLG report.

¹⁶ From paragraphs 6.24 and 6.25 of the HLG report.

The Implementation Process: The High Representative and the Forum

On 18 December 2006 the report of the HLG was presented and debated in the General Assembly in a thematic informal plenary debate, receiving very positive reactions by most of the states that intervened on behalf of their regional groupings.

According to the same report, the pivotal element in order to start with the implementation phase of the Alliance was the appointment of a High Representative for the Alliance of Civilisations. This was relatively delayed, basically due to the change of Secretary General at the end of December 2006 and the subsequent reorganisation of the key posts of the UN Secretariat with the entrance of Ban Ki-Moon.

Finally, with the support of the co-sponsoring states on 26 April 2007 Jorge Sampaio was appointed High Representative, with the responsibility for the overall impulse and coordination of the Alliance initiative, with the support of a technical secretariat based in the UN headquarters in New York.

According also to the recommendations of the report, a Forum under UN auspices will take place on a regular basis in order to coordinate and give visibility to the different actions taken under its umbrella and scope of action. This Forum will be open to the participation of governmental representatives but also representatives of international organisations and civil society. The first one is scheduled to take place at the end of this year, although the specific dates and location are still to be determined.

Final Remarks

It is important to emphasize, among many other aspects, the innovative nature of the report for several aspects. I would like to underline a couple of them.

On the one hand, the report clearly «[...] recommends a practicable program of action for states (at national, regional and local levels) [...]»¹⁷ thereby reinforcing the role that the different levels of government within the states (municipalities, different levels of regional governance depending on the nature of each state) do have in being partners in the process and in

¹⁷ Paragraph 1.5 of the HLG report. See www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf.

the action; and therefore evidencing that global affairs are no more an exclusive field for diplomats or representatives of the executive branch of national governments, and recognising the real nature of global interdependence which requests the involvement of all.

On the other hand the report perceives civil society – in its immense diversity – not any more as a dispensable complement for humanitarian action in those spaces in which governments do not – or do not want to – reach, but a *sine qua non* partner for the success of the Alliance process¹⁸.

It is important also to underline that the innovative elements of the report are not only the ones referring to the actors to implement it. In fact, this process is the result of *another other way* of understanding international relations, contrary to what is preached by the supporters of the *realpolitik*. Indeed the report is the result of that *way* which believes that certain international principles like those emanating from the core UN processes and declarations (the ones mentioned in the Chapter on *Guiding Principles* of the report, or those of – just to cite some examples – the *Declaration and Plan of Action for a Culture of Peace*¹⁹ and of the *Global Agenda for Dialogue Among Civilisations*²⁰) are not only viable but essential to foster the international framework of understanding so needed to undertake the grave challenges – like the one of the climate change – that endanger all us and the diversity of life.

¹⁸ See paragraph 5.17 on *The Central Importance of Civil Society Activism*, 5.18 on *Establishing Partnerships to Advance an Alliance of Civilisations* and point 4 on «*Self-organised Alliance Councils...*» in Chapter VIII on *Implementation of Recommendations* of the HLG report. See www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf.

¹⁹ *Declaration and Plan of Action on a Culture of Peace*, A/RES/53/243 of 6 October 1999.

²⁰ *Global Agenda for Dialogue Among Civilisations*, A/RES/56/6 of 21 November 2001.