

# **Working together with religious and traditional leaders**

A tool for joint action  
towards abolition



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FIACAT prioritises gender inclusivity. Where this proves to be uneasy or where we deem it preferable to ensure the text is readable, we will use either masculine or feminine terminology, but with a gender-neutral meaning.

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**W**hatever their teaching on other subjects, all religious and philosophical communities, together with all spiritual beliefs and traditions of wisdom that exist within humanity, put the principle of life uppermost among their concerns. It is this respect for human life that anchors the ban on torture so firmly in the consciences of those who claim to have religious wisdom. Unfortunately, that does not mean that members of our communities always behave irreproachably. Still, primary teachings do rely on a total and permanent ban of this evil practice that consists in intentionally harming others.

Of course, for the ACAT network, this universal ban on torture, endorsed by the most important declarations of human rights – Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), European Convention on Human Rights (1950), African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981) –, extends to respecting life given by God, who is its only authentic master.

Taking away a life following a court decision amounts to inflicting total and extreme torture as well as supplanting He who is master of life and death.

If we acknowledge that God is the only master of life and death, we must also recognise that our role has never been one of deliberately taking a life from anyone; this is true both for those who might have been wrongly convicted (and for whom the death penalty should never come into question) and for those who perpetrate crimes.

Therefore, let us unite in reinforcing the spirit of humanity!

Christophe d'Aloisio  
President of FIACAT



# Introduction

Over the course of just a few years, Africa has become the most dynamic continent in terms of making progress towards abolishing the death penalty. However, this transformation has been met with resistance. Among the reasons often advanced for maintaining the death penalty, whether in those countries that still enforce it or those that no longer do so but retain it as a legal instrument, the following are most frequently cited:

1 • The population has limited confidence in its institutions, particularly the judicial system, which it believes to be slow, ineffective and corrupt. Capital punishment is thus considered the only way to guarantee the ultimate punishment in the context of a failing legal and prison system.

2 • The co-existence of customary law and positive law does not necessarily work in favour of the fight for abolition. Customary law, sometimes reinforced by religious traditions, can recognise the death penalty as a legitimate punishment for crimes that are considered seriously harmful to the community.

Abolition of the death penalty cannot be imposed solely through legal or judicial means. It requires a deep-rooted transformation in people's ways of thinking, which inevitably involves bringing together opinion-makers in their diversity. The media, through to their

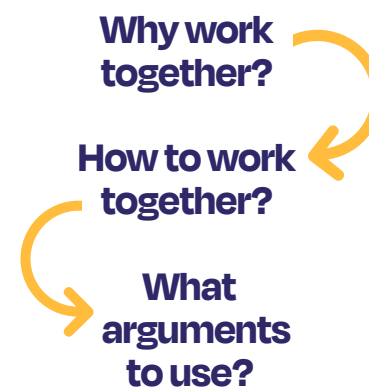
ability to inform and raise awareness among the wider public, civil society organisations, through their grassroots bases and expertise, and opinion makers of all backgrounds through their influence on public debates, all provide vital bridges to bring about change in how this practice is perceived. Among these influential actors, religious and traditional leaders occupy a special place. Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the regions in the world where religion plays a most primordial role<sup>(1)</sup>. Where communities continue to turn towards their spiritual guides to seek explanation for complex moral questions and guide their collective choices, their commitment to the abolitionist fight is a profound necessity.

Moreover, their mobilisation provides additional means of action: on substance, the concepts of justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption, central in many religious and cultural traditions throughout the continent, offer a rich seam of resources to rethink the punitive approach in response to the most serious crimes; in form, the spiritual mission of leaders, their ability to organise tradition and modernity, their intimate knowledge of their communities and their ability to create links, give them a unique sense of legitimacy and make them essential actors in any major process of societal change.

On the basis of this premise, FIACAT has organised over the last few years, in cooperation with its members «Actions by Christians to Abolish Torture» (ACAT), a number of workshops to build awareness among opinion-makers about the abolition of the death penalty, in particular targeting religious and traditional leaders, the media and members of civil society; in Mali (2014 and 2018), in the Congo (2015), in Chad, Niger and Burkina Faso (2016), in the Central African Republic (2017), in Liberia (2019) and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2021).

With a view to drawing lessons from these different experiences, in May 2025, in Dakar (Senegal), a seminar was organised in cooperation with ACAT Senegal to build greater awareness among religious and traditional leaders about the abolition of the death penalty. It brought together over 40 participants, religious and traditional leaders and members of civil society, from 9 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Liberia, Niger and Senegal).

This tool stems from the many discussions that took place during these activities. It is aimed at those involved in the abolitionist movement who wish to understand and mobilise the potential of religious and traditional leaders.



It aims to explore the specific nature of their different roles and the many and varied forms their contribution could take (**Why work together?**): their moral authority and social influence, their unique capacity in bringing people together, as well as the specific perspective they can bring to the abolitionist fight. The tool also examines practical strategies to involve them in the abolitionist movement, in a collaborative approach that lies at the heart of any lasting commitment and real impact (**How to work together?**). Lastly, it explores common arguments to religious and customary traditions that can be used when carrying out joint actions (**What arguments to use?**).

<sup>(1)</sup> Source: *The Age Gap in Religion Around the World*, Pew Research Center, June 2018, p. 50-56.

# The death penalty in the African Union

The last few years have been defined by many signs of progress in the fight for abolition across the world. Today, two thirds of countries in the world have abolished the death penalty in law or in practice.

This drive is at its most dynamic in Africa. In 1990, only one African state, Cabo Verde, had abolished the death penalty; by 31 December 2024, 28 of them had, more than half the continent. Since 2020, the Central African Republic, Chad, Sierra Leone and Zambia have joined the ranks of abolitionist countries for all crimes; and Ghana and Zimbabwe have done so for ordinary crimes<sup>(1)</sup>.

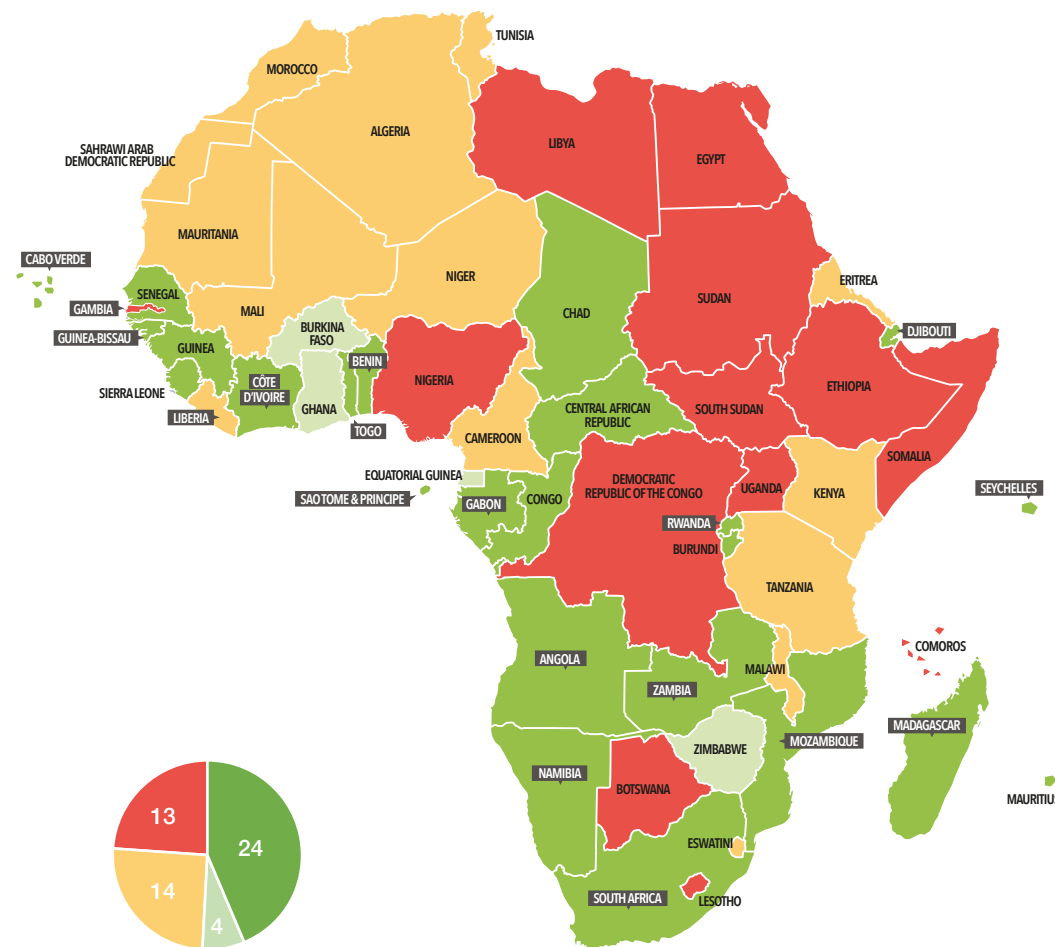
This commitment across the continent has been further reinforced by the ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (OP2-ICCPR), which is specifically aimed at the abolition of the death penalty. 18 African countries have taken this step – out of 92 States that are party to the Protocol – including Côte d'Ivoire and Zambia in 2024. Moreover, in December 2024, 30 African States voted in favour of the 10<sup>th</sup> resolution of the United Nations General Assembly calling for a moratorium on executions; they were 17 in 2007 for the first resolution<sup>(2)</sup>.

Only a minority of States in the African Union maintain the death penalty. 13 countries continue to apply it on a regular basis and 14 others still hand down death sentences and have not incorporated abolition into domestic legislation, despite for the most part not having enforced it for over thirty years.

The context of terrorism in West Africa and conflicts in Central Africa sometimes hinders further progress: as a consequence, Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of Congo have recently shown signs of regression.

The **African Commission of Human and Peoples' Rights** (ACHPR) and its Working Group on the Death Penalty are actively supporting this evolution. Article 4 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights of 1981 protects the right to life; and, even if it does not expressly ban recourse to the death penalty, the ACHPR outlined in its **General Observation on the Right to Life** in October 2015 that it can only be enforced for the most serious crimes and handed down as a sentence after a fair trial.

In 2015, the ACHPR adopted a **draft Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Abolition of the Death Penalty in Africa**, providing for abolition throughout the continent of Africa. The text was sent to African Union bodies but has not yet been adopted.



- Abolitionist States
- Abolitionist States for ordinary crimes
- States applying a moratorium on the death penalty
- Retentionist States

**ETAT** States that have ratified the Second optional Protocol to the ICCPR, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty

Sources : <sup>(1)</sup> Amnesty International and World Coalition against the Death Penalty - <sup>(2)</sup> United Nations

# The role of religious and traditional leaders in the fight for abolition

“ In many communities, religious leaders are consulted in important decisions that touch on both the family and society at large.

## ■ Leading moral authority and social influence

Religious and traditional leaders play a unique role in Sub-Saharan African societies, where religion and tradition extensively shape values and individual and collective behaviour. Their moral authority is recognised and respected by large segments of the population, well beyond places of worship: in many communities, religious leaders are consulted in important decisions that touch on both the family and society at large. When they adopt a position, they not only bring together their direct followers, but also influence more extensive networks of sympathisers and social actors. Their word therefore carries considerable weight in public opinion and can influence collective attitudes, how public opinion is formed, and political discussions, especially in connection with complex ethical debates such as the death penalty.

“ When Christian, Muslim, and traditional leaders unite around the issue of abolition, they demonstrate that opposition to the death penalty transcends denominational distinctions[...]

## ■ Unique mediators

Religious leaders can unite diverse communities around shared human values, creating coalitions that extend beyond ethnic, political, social, or denominational lines. In contexts where divisions can paralyse public debate, their legitimacy can create spaces for inclusive and peaceful dialogue.

This position gives them access to various levels of society. They can benefit from direct access to government officials, traditional authorities, and community leaders, offering unique opportunities to influence policies at various levels. Their ability to bring together interfaith coalitions also considerably reinforces the impact of their action. When Christian, Muslim, and traditional leaders unite around the issue of abolition, they demonstrate that opposition to the death penalty transcends denominational distinctions and is rooted in universal human values. These coalitions can also extend out to civil society, lawyers' associations, and human rights movements. This capacity to create unity is fundamental in generating basic grassroots support for a major political reform towards abolition.

“ Present abolition not as a weakness but as an act of spiritual strength and social maturity.

## ■ A distinctive perspective

In fighting for abolition, religious and traditional leaders bring a new dimension and a complementary vision to legal or political strategies. They can invoke the fundamental principles of their faith – compassion, forgiveness, redemption, the sacredness of life – to establish an abolitionist approach rooted in the spiritual values shared by their communities.

They can also suggest an approach centred on spiritual transformation and community reconciliation, promoting processes of reconciliation and forgiveness that resonate in many African traditions.

Lastly, their community roots enable them to work on the root causes of violence and criminal behaviour, through the development of programmes aimed at prevention, education, and social support that tackle the roots of the problem rather than how it manifests itself.

Religious leaders can thereby offer fresh perspectives to take a novel approach to criminal justice response; and present abolition not as a weakness but as an act of spiritual strength and social maturity.

# Tools and practices for mobilisation

The suggestions are not intended to be exhaustive. They offer generic means of reflection and action that can be reworked and adapted to reflect differing needs and contexts.



## Know

- **Map religious and traditional leaders** to understand how they are organised and identify their spheres of influence.
- **Mobilise religious institutions and allied leaders** to identify the relevant stakeholders and create a solid network.
- **Identify the relevant strategic partners**, such as national and international denominational organisations, secular organisations within civil society, public institutions and services, the media, or other structures that can provide financial or technical support.
- **Establish an open dialogue** to identify the diversity of positions, resistances, scopes for action, and possible obstacles.



- Ensure denominational, ethnic, geographic, and linguistic representation
- Create a network or coalition that includes all the identified key stakeholders
- Formulate together common goals to frame actions



## Strengthen

- **Organise training and capacity building sessions for religious and traditional leaders** on different aspects of the death penalty and its abolition from the perspective of faith, tradition and their own roles within society – in particular theological, ethical and moral implications; social, political and legal aspects; restorative justice and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.
  - **Include abolition awareness** in theological training and religious teaching.
  - **Promote experience sharing between religious and traditional leaders**, including on the challenges they face.
- Include religious and traditional leaders in actions carried out by civil society and other stakeholders around the issue of the abolition
  - Organise workshops between leaders (within the same faith or in an interfaith approach) to discuss the arguments, experiences and practices
  - Organise meetings between religious stakeholders and the families of victims or of those sentenced to death



## Produce

- **Develop arguments and resources**, tailored to different religious traditions and local contexts, that leaders can use when engaging with their communities and in their advocacy work with decision-makers.
- Organise sessions to study religious texts that deal with the themes of mercy, redemption, and justice
  - Prepare talking points on abolition that can be used in prayers, sermons and ceremonies
  - Develop teaching modules for theological training, religious education and youth programmes
  - Design advocacy tools that include expert testimonies based on religious teachings



## Mobilise

- **Set up awareness-raising actions for abolition within communities, in coordination with religious and traditional leaders** as part of their functions: for example, when they preach, during ceremonies, during special political and legal events (trials, executions, legislation reviews, etc.).
  - **Encourage the media visibility of abolitionist religious leaders** in traditional media and on social networks.
  - **Enable the involvement of religious and traditional leaders in supporting the families of victims and those sentenced to death**, as well as in processes of reconciliation and dialogue, where possible.
  - **Support advocacy towards decision makers** led by civil society and leaders.
- Jointly participate in publishing op-eds, radio programmes and communication campaigns on social media in favour of abolition
  - Organise actions on justice and abolition of the death penalty within communities: themed worship services, prayer vigils, debates, discussion groups, etc.
  - Involve religious and traditional leaders in meetings with decision makers

# Towards a common position in favour of abolition

“ *Whether you are a human rights defender, a customary or religious leader, a political decision-maker or a member of the judiciary, we all agree on the sanctity of human life.*

Daniel Moundzogo, Pastor  
(Cameroon)

### ■ Protecting the individual

#### **The sacred character of the human being.**

All religions and traditions practised in Africa affirm the inherent dignity of each human being; life and the individual are sacred and belong to the divine. This sacred human nature remains intact whatever actions the individual carries out, making each life irreplaceable and worthy of protection. Moreover, in the same way as each human being is fallible as an individual, so are human systems: the death penalty always carries a risk of wrongful yet irreversible execution, which contravenes the fundamental principle of the sacred nature of life.

#### **The capacity for redemption and transformation.**

Religious traditions constantly affirm the human potential for repentance, rehabilitation and spiritual growth. They call on believers to respond to wrongdoing with compassion rather than with vengeance. Jesus' teachings on forgiveness, Islam's emphasis on mercy and traditional African concepts of restorative justice all prefer healing to punishment. These principles recognise that real justice tries to restore the humanity of the individual rather than destroy it. The death penalty denies this fundamental possibility for transformation and cuts short the journey towards spiritual healing.

“ *Our ancestors taught us  
to mend, not to end.*

Nana Kwame Agyapong, Traditional leader  
(Ghana)

### ■ Preserving the community

#### **Promoting healing and reconciliation.**

Religious and traditional communities understand that violence gives rise to violence, creating infinite cycles of retribution that damage entire societies. African traditional systems of justice and religious teachings generally emphasise restoring harmony within the community rather than simply punishing the wrongdoers. They all offer alternatives to punitive justice based on reparation, compensation and reconciliation.

#### **Protecting the most vulnerable.**

The discriminatory application of the death penalty that disproportionately affects the poor, the marginalised and minorities, comes into direct conflict with religious teachings about equality, solidarity and caring for the most vulnerable. Religions and traditions all emphasise special protection for those who cannot protect themselves, making the enforcement of the death penalty a violation of fundamental religious principles.

### ■ Being part of one's time

#### **The death penalty as a colonial legacy.**

The death penalty in many Sub-Saharan African countries is a legacy of colonial legal systems; these institutionalised the death penalty within wider legal structures, often replacing traditional African systems of justice that used to emphasise restorative justice, compensation and community healing rather than enforcement.

“ *We need to learn  
from the past so that  
we can forgive and  
move on to new perspectives  
for the future.*

Me Guy Antoine Dangavo, ACAT RCA  
(Central African Republic)

In my capacity as President of ACAT Senegal, I recognise that the involvement of religious and traditional authorities forms a fundamental pillar in our fight to abolish the death penalty throughout Africa. These figures, firmly rooted within our societies, bring a moral and spiritual legitimacy that stretches well beyond that of public institutions, often chronically weakened and dysfunctional.

In a context in which confidence in the judicial system remains fragile and where certain traditions continue to legitimise the death penalty, the influence of these leaders can give rise to a genuine transformation of people's mindsets. Their words resonate with particular force in their populations, especially in rural areas where their authority is undisputed.

The convergence of Muslim, Christian and traditional voices paves the way towards remarkable prospects for the reconciliation of traditional and modern legal systems. This spiritual synergy allows them to draw from a common base of humanist values – the sacredness of life, mercy, the possibility of redemption – to build an authentically African abolitionist line of argument.

This coming together of forces carries with it a special strategic importance in regions facing terrorism, where the death penalty is seen as a legitimate response to extreme acts of violence. When faced with these challenges, the commitment of religious leaders stands as a powerful antidote against the radicalisation of positions.

In training and bringing together these figures of authority, we are creating a network of grassroots communication that can reach even the most isolated populations, including those where illiteracy hampers access to information. These leaders thereby become ambassadors of the abolitionist cause, the bearers of a message that is adapted to local realities and cultural sensibilities.

This strategy can only hope to succeed if it is scrupulous in respecting the diversity of our cultural and spiritual heritages. It demands close partnership with civil society organisations to develop a line of argument that is both rigorous and sensitive to local realities.

The mobilisation of consciences, carried by those who embody our most deeply held values, offers the best chance we have to see the emergence of an Africa that is free of the death penalty once and for all.

Alain Sambou  
Président de l'ACAT Sénégal



## FIACAT

The International Federation of ACATs, FIACAT, is an international Christian non-governmental human rights organisation, set up in 1987, which works towards the eradication of torture and the abolition of the death penalty. The Federation brings together some thirty national associations, the ACATs, present in three continents.

### FIACAT – representing its members in international and regional organisations

It enjoys Consultative Status with the United Nations (UN), Participative Status with the Council of Europe and Observer Status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). FIACAT is also accredited to the International Organisation of la Francophonie (OIF).

By referring the concerns of its members working on the ground to international bodies, FIACAT's aim is to encourage the adoption of relevant recommendations and their implementation by governments. FIACAT works towards the application of international human rights conventions, the prevention of torture in places of detention, and an end to enforced disappearances and impunity. It also takes part in the fight against the death penalty by encouraging States to abolish this inhuman punishment from their legislation and by raising awareness among opinion leaders, religious leaders and customary leaders about abolition.

To give added impact to these efforts, FIACAT is a founding member of several campaigning coalitions, in particular the World Coalition against the Death Penalty (WCADP).

### FIACAT – building up the capacities of the ACAT network in thirty countries

FIACAT assists its member associations in organising themselves, supporting them so that they can become important players in civil society, capable of raising public awareness and having an impact on the authorities in their country. It coordinates the network by promoting exchanges, proposing regional and international training events and joint campaigns, thus supporting the activities of the ACATs and providing them with exposure on the international scene.

### FIACAT – an independent network of Christians united in fighting torture and the death penalty

FIACAT's mission is to raise awareness of torture and the death penalty among churches and Christian organisations in order to convince them to act for their abolition and eradication.

fiacat

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## Know

- Map religious and traditional stakeholders and strategic partners to identify how they are organised and work with each other, and identify key resource persons



## Strengthen

- Organise capacity-building activities for religious and traditional stakeholders on the death penalty and its implications
- Include the issue of the death penalty and its abolition in theological training programmes and traditional religious teaching
- Promote the sharing of experiences and good practices between stakeholders



## Produce

- Develop and disseminate arguments and other resources usable in awareness-raising activities



## Mobilise

- Organise activities to raise awareness in public opinion: themed worship services, prayer vigils, group reflection days
- Organise joint advocacy actions towards decision-makers
- Encourage the media presence of abolitionist religious leaders in traditional media and on social networks
- Enable the involvement of religious leaders in supporting the families of victims and of those sentenced to death

With financial support from



This document was published with financial support from the **Agence française de développement** (AFD – French Development Agency) and from **Missio** (Germany).

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Graphic design : Meltii studio