

Blueprint For Success

2020-2021

EVERYONE should have
the **RIGHT** to be **SECULAR**



Introduction

Atheist Alliance International was founded in the United States as Atheist Alliance in 1991. In 2001, reflecting the changes in the organization, the name was changed to Atheist Alliance International (AAI). At that time, the organization's role was to educate people about atheism and to support atheistic groups around the world.

In 2017, AAI changed its focus towards a more campaigning role. Its aim became, and still is, to normalize atheism—to ensure atheists enjoy the same protection under human rights legislation as the religious, to eliminate discrimination against atheists and to support everyone's right to free expression on religious matters, their right to a non-religious identity and to openly manifest that identity. Alongside that, AAI is committed to supporting atheists around the world who are excluded, disparaged, discriminated against and criminalized.

With almost 40 international affiliates and growing, AAI is a presence around the world in support of atheist rights.

In 2019, AAI employed its first paid Executive Director in a bid to grow faster and ensure campaigns and projects are efficiently managed and deliver results.

Purpose of this document

AAI's goals are multi-generational. It is unlikely that anyone working at AAI today will be alive to see our goals fully achieved. Our generation will see wins but we won't see victory. This document is an answer to the question, how do we stay focussed when our goals are so distant?

The job of this document is to avoid diversions. It is to ensure our resources and our efforts are building towards the future we want to see, it is to ensure every step we take is deliberate and calculated, and that every step is the best available step to bring our goals closer.

Who is responsible for this blueprint?

The Blueprint is owned by all of us: the board, affiliates and members but AAI's President has a special responsibility to monitor progress and ensure we are being true to it and the President must make sure it is reviewed every 12 - 18 months.

Board members should take account of this Blueprint when they make any decision.

This, the first version of the Blueprint, was drafted by the AAI board but it is our intention in future years to set up an online discussion forum where members and affiliates can contribute to the drafting process and the document will be presented at each AGM for ratification.

Scope

The Blueprint is concerned with how we drive the organization towards achieving our Vision and Mission. It is about how we acquire resources and how we allocate them. It is about how we organize ourselves and collaborate with others. It is about priorities. It is about new things we should do and things we should do more of, less of, or stop doing.

It is not about our Vision and Mission—these things drive the Blueprint. Nor is it about individuals or policies and procedures.

This document rests on and must be compliant with AAI's values and the AAI Bylaws. The Blueprint will not serve its purpose unless it is completely honest about our resources and capabilities, our strengths and our weaknesses.

SWOT analysis

Like all organizations, AAI has strengths and weaknesses and faces opportunities and threats. In this section, we will set these out so they may serve as a foundation for our thinking.

Strengths

1. History: AAI has been around since 1991 and is well-known as an atheist group.
2. The only specifically atheist group to have special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council which gives us input to the Human Rights Council.
3. 501(C)3 status.
4. A committed and harmonious activist board.
5. A democratic structure.
6. Low overheads.
7. A well-known and effective Executive Director.

Weaknesses

1. AAI's annual income is far too low.
2. Membership roll is far lower than it should be.
3. A growing number of affiliates but far more are needed.
4. Key gaps in human resources (legal expertise, esp. related to immigration and asylum, webmaster, fund-raiser, Google Ads, etc)
5. Little or no presence in mainstream media.
6. The public is little aware of AAI's strategic change of focus in the past 2 - 3 years.
7. Heavy reliance on unpaid volunteers.

Opportunities

1. Increase collaboration in areas such as human rights and protecting at-risk atheists.
2. Increase activity at the UNHRC and European Council.
3. Gain traction with major podcasts and mainstream media.
4. Identify and work with opinion leaders.
5. Grow the number of AAI members.
6. Optimize the use of our Google Ads grant.
7. Build AAI's reputation for integrity and delivery.
8. Capitalize on the trend in Islamic countries for (mostly) younger people to reject Islam.
9. Attract major funding sources.

Threats

1. The trend, most noticeably in the USA, to merge atheist activism with political and social movements is leading to dilution and fragmentation of atheist voices.
2. The previous EDs moved our website to an unsuitable host where it is at risk of a major failure.
3. The decline in religiosity in Europe, Australasia and in North America could lead to a decline in interest in supporting atheist groups in those regions.

4. The growth of Islam and efforts by Islamic groups to increase the legal protection of religions coupled with denial of human rights in Islamic countries is a long-term threat to atheists.
5. The Covid-19 global pandemic is justifiably drawing international attention and action, however, this in turn is diminishing efforts toward human rights issues.

Strategies

AAI's job is to make a difference to the lives of atheists and to move the world towards secularism and away from theocracy.

Of course, we can help a handful of atheists each year but helping atheists is really a recognition of failure—it is akin to applying a sticking plaster to wounds. Our real job is to stop the wounding. And that means we have to press for the abolition of blasphemy and apostasy laws, and press for respect for human rights, everywhere. This is our most fundamental task.

Achieving this fundamental task demands, above all, a massive increase in influence. Our voice must be heard, and respected, by governments and by human rights organizations everywhere. We must become the Amnesty International of secularism.

Amnesty International has a thirty-year head start on us—they opened their doors in 1961. Now they have more than 7 million members and supporters. Head to their website and read the third paragraph on the homepage:

"Few would have predicted when we started that torturers would become international outlaws. That most countries would abolish the death penalty. And seemingly untouchable dictators would be made to answer for their crimes."

The United Nations drafted The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. That historic document laid the foundations for all human rights treaties ever since but the UN's efforts to implement human rights worldwide have proven ineffectual. It is likely true that Amnesty International has done more to ensure governments respect human rights than has the United Nations.

AAI could echo the words of Amnesty International's founder, British lawyer Peter Benenson:

"Only when the last prisoner of conscience has been freed, when the last torture chamber has been closed, when the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a reality for the world's people, will our work be done."

For the foreseeable future, we need to pursue a growth strategy. This breaks down into six components:

1. **Grow our income** which means more members and better fundraising. If we could double our membership every year, within a decade we would have more than 2 million members.
2. **Grow our influence**, which means more affiliates and more collaborations with like-minded organizations.
3. **Grow our reputation** which means repeated articulation of brand purpose, our uniqueness, our values and association with trusted individuals.
4. **Demonstrate success** with high-profile campaign victories. We need campaigns that will hit the headlines everywhere. If we engage in one high-profile campaign and fail to win, we will still benefit far more than we would with 10 campaigns of little consequence.
5. **Employ high-quality people** (as funds allow) to drive us forward.
6. **Systems and methods**. Ensure our methods of team and task management are efficient and that our website and social media presence is robust and capable.

There are three reasons why we should not aim for incremental growth—we should consider targeting exponential growth instead. Firstly, we are very small today, so, for example, doubling membership would not be impossibly difficult. Secondly, the five components of the growth strategy are mutually supportive so, if we grow our reputation, we will gain more members or, if we engage in high-profile campaigns, we will grow our reputation which will grow our memberships. Thirdly, the task before us is enormous and we are small. Aiming for incremental growth could mean it will be decades before we make any real difference.

If we think small, we are guaranteed to stay small. If we think big, we may fail but it will not be because we were afraid to reach for the sky.

Priorities for this Blueprint

It is not the job of this document to define specific projects—its role is to indicate the kinds of projects that will be necessary for each strategy and to set goals.

STRATEGY 1: Grow our Income

Income growth will mainly come from the accumulated benefits of strategies 2 through 5. However, there are six things that we can do to take the best advantage of these strategies. Our target should be to double individual memberships within 12 months.

1. Review our membership categories and the sign-up page on our website, ensure they are appealing, easy to understand and easy to use.
2. Consider offering membership incentives. For example, a free initial period or a free gift such as a choice of PDF books.

3. Appoint a person to take responsibility for membership matters. Such a person could resolve problems with joining or payment, chase non-renewers, clean-up the membership roll, manage offers, etc.
4. Consider additional ongoing membership benefits such as publishing a members' gallery or members' quotations on the website or social media, competitions, a closed, members-only Facebook group with guest presenters and opportunities to discuss AAI policies.
5. Take on an experienced fundraiser to target charitable grants and donations from individuals, corporations and foundations. This could be as a board member or as a volunteer or an employee paid on a performance basis.
6. Continue to run periodic campaigns for members and donations on social media and ensure they are coordinated across all media.

Strategy 2: Grow our Influence

We should aim to double the number of affiliates within 12 months.

1. Review and update affiliate information on the website.
2. Target regional directors to recruit more affiliates and to attract larger and more influential organizations.
3. Consider ways to obtain more affiliate engagement with AAI.
4. Consider ways to add more benefits for affiliates such as advice when setting up new organizations, provision of atheist books, providing speakers (online in most cases).
5. Set up the planned Advisory Council with prominent individuals and ensure it has suitable engagement and publicity.
6. Plan a collaboration campaign. Target suitable organizations, and aim to work with them on specific campaigns, issuing joint statements, periodic meetings, fundraising etc. In some cases, we may offer nomination to the AAI board or to our Advisory council.
7. Press for appearances on popular podcasts and mainstream media.
8. Prepare a strategy for growing our social media following.
9. Increase and promote our participation at the UN Human Rights Council and European Council.
10. Consider engaging with other human rights organizations such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Amnesty International and the International Federation for Human Rights.
11. Promote the Right to be Secular Campaign. We should aim for tens of thousands of signers.

Strategy 3: Grow our Reputation

The Executive Director should review our public face for the past 12 months and give us a score based on the number of mentions and the ratio of positive versus negative mentions. This should be repeated after 12 months and show measurable improvement.

1. Review our public face across the media. Seek consistent branding imagery, identify the factors that make us unique and ensure these points are evident wherever possible.
2. Make use of opportunities to make public, and act on our organizational values.
3. Prepare additional position statements, such as the upcoming one on Islamophobia.
4. Get the AAI podcast started, ensure it is of high quality and at suitable times encourage prominent atheists to appear.
5. Make better use of Twitter by encouraging prominent atheists to retweet our tweets.
6. Build an influential blog that will bring people to our website and can be monetized in a similar way to the Patheos blog.
7. Ensure our write-ups on Wikipedia and similar sites are consistent, positive and up-to-date.
8. Seek alliances with other secular organizations.

Strategy 4: Demonstrate Success

1. During campaign planning search for two campaigns that are highly supportive of our Vision and Values, will make a big difference in one country or internationally and would be highly newsworthy.
2. Ensure progress on all campaigns are publicly reported and discussed on social media (except where security considerations indicate otherwise).
3. Press ahead with existing major campaigns including, The Right to be Secular, The Worship Centre in Nigeria and, possibly, the abolition of blasphemy laws in Nigeria.
4. Promote the successes of ASN.

Strategy 5: Employ Experienced Staff

1. With the employment of an Executive Director, we have seen how qualified, salaried people can change the tempo of our work versus volunteers. We should look for further opportunities to build on this experience. This should only be considered when there is a clear benefit to using an employee rather than a volunteer and only when our income makes this investment possible. It is unlikely, any further opportunities for employees will occur before the end of 2021 but this strategy is included because it is important and could be invoked in the event of unexpected, windfall income.

Strategy 6: Systems & methods

1. For the foreseeable future, AAI will be resource-constrained. We will be short of hands and cash which means it is vital to make the best use of what we have. We have selected a free package called ASANA for managing our projects. This supports communications between team members and allows progress to be tracked by team members and managers. It is a big step forward compared with email and Google Docs. It is important that careful thought is given to embedding this into the organization so that it becomes the tool of choice for everyone. Review ASANA implementation after 6 months.
2. Because of the work we do with atheists at risk and the fact that we are a target for certain organizations, it is crucial that we place security at the top of our priorities for information systems. We should carry out a selection process to select software to store our login credentials and keep them safe.
3. Our website host was migrated to a new supplier early in 2020. This has proven inadequate for the volume of traffic through our website and is now causing frequent alarms. Hosting and support need to be addressed as a priority.
4. Prioritize filling vacant board positions and on supporting new board members to carry out their roles effectively. This is especially vital for Regional Directors as this is a new role within AAI.
5. Complete AAI's handbooks of policies and procedures.
6. Fill key resource gaps. Shortages we have are not about numbers of people, they are about skills that are hard to attract. For example, we need legal expertise, esp. related to immigration and asylum, a webmaster, a fund-raiser, book reviewers and a Google Ads expert.

Making this happen

This Blueprint is primarily concerned to identify the things AAI must do to achieve its goals. However, it will achieve nothing if none of this gets done.

First, we must build a consensus. Board members must agree this document shows the way forward and affiliates must give their opinions at the AGM at the end of June 2020. The Blueprint can be finalized after those inputs.

Secondly, we must allocate these tasks to people and ensure we have the capabilities to make them happen. We do not want to overburden people or to see burn-out so we must find the resources to make all this achievable.

Thirdly, we must decide on timelines and monitor progress. The Executive Director will need to play a big role in this process and will need to report to the board, perhaps at every board meeting.

Let's start with consensus.