



ENGAGING RELIGION AND FAITH-BASED ACTORS

Overview 2015-2016

- DRAFT VERSION -

“Understanding the context and working with the right actors determines the success of any development engagement. Culture is that context. It is (...) a matter of common sense to work with culture.”

Babatunde Osotimehin

“[I]f development can be seen as enhancement of our living standards, (...) then efforts geared to development can hardly ignore the world of culture.”

Amartya Sen

GLOBALLY

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) continues to foster dialogue and innovative partnerships with faith-based organizations (FBOs), national multi-religious mechanisms as well as religious, traditional and indigenous leaders to build respective institutional capacities to implement Agenda 2030.

At the global level, UNFPA serves as chair of the United Nations Task Force for Engagement with Faith-Based Organizations on Sustainable Development (short: UN Task Force on Religion and Development) which acts as a consultative mechanism within the United Nations to host policy dialogues and convene faith-based partners around shared developmental and humanitarian challenges. In that capacity, it continues to provide a lead facilitator for the UN system-wide staff annual training on “Religion, Development and Humanitarian Work”, provided under the auspices of the UN Staff College.

On behalf of the UN Task Force, UNFPA further convenes consultations during key intergovernmental fora – namely the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the ECOSOC Ministerial Meetings, and the General Assembly, with global faith partners. During the 2015 General Assembly, UNFPA, in partnership with the World Bank and over 25 international faith-based development organizations and 90 faith leaders from around the world, hosted a launch of the Moral Imperative to Eliminate Poverty and Realize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In his speech delivered on at the event, the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon laudated the initiative, as well as the inter-agency efforts led by UNFPA, to reach out to a lead developmental constituency.

During the 2016 General Assembly, the UN Task Force convened concerned representatives of Member States, the United Nations and civil society, including FBOs as well as voices from the field, to bear witness to the impact of human trafficking, forced migration and atrocity crimes. The one-day consultation meeting had two parts, the first focusing on the phenomena of human trafficking and forced migration, the second on the role of faith-based organizations in responding to them. The consultation was designed to complement the UN General Assembly Summit for Refugees and Migrants held on 19 September 2016.

Moreover, UNFPA convened over 250 faith-based actors in a Special Session on Religious Engagement at the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, in Istanbul. The Special Session resulted in an unprecedented outcome document in which the faith-based actors – many of whom constitute the largest humanitarian and development providers – called upon the international community to recognize and affirm their significant and often unique holistic contributions to humanitarian work, to consider them as equal partners in this work, and to scale up efforts to support their important contributions to communities around the globe. In turn, these major faith-based humanitarian actors committed, together, to:

- Serving the most vulnerable in humanitarian settings;

- Upholding and expanding the significant humanitarian response of FBOs;
- Overcoming the manipulative and abusive attempts to link religion with violence, terrorism, or exclusion of others;
- Keeping affected persons at the center of all assistance planned and provided; maintaining robust beneficiary feedback mechanisms;
- Ensuring that women’s and girls’ rights are protected, their needs are met, and their ability to engage in decision making is enhanced; and
- Continuing to play an active role in humanitarian response coordination.

Other activities include the development of a joint UN statement on preventing violence and discrimination against LGBTI persons. Published during 2015, the statement aims to reduce violence and discrimination experienced by LGBTI persons and to promote understanding and acceptance in order for LGBTI people to be able to claim and enjoy their human rights to live free of violence and discrimination.

A series of implementation tools that support community empowerment of key populations at risk of HIV were also compiled during this period. In total, four implementation tools have been prepared between 2012 and 2016. With community empowerment at the center of these implementation tools, they seek to defend and promote the human rights of marginalized key populations to live healthy and safe lives within society and reduce discrimination and violence experienced by them.

Finally, UNFPA has been engaged in a series of human rights “frontier dialogues” on cutting-edge human rights issues, and to ensure human rights is retained as an overarching principle and driving force within the sustainable development agenda. Frontier dialogues are currently underway during 2016 on human rights aspects of urbanization, discrimination in health care settings, prevention of violent extremism, statelessness, displacement and migration, and climate change. UNFPA is engaging in a number of these dialogues being spearheaded by the UNDG Human Rights Working Group.

AFRICA

EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

The UNFPA Office for Eastern and Southern Africa (ESARO) has developed a long term experience in partnering with FBOs for the promotion of gender equality, gender-based violence (GBV), HIV prevention and response, family planning and maternal health. Religious networks are an important means of reaching community members and families with information.

Ongoing discussions with a broad range of cultural and religious actors focus around the most effective means to integrate key messages around sex and sexuality in preachings and sermons among congregations, as well as in theological schooling and training curricula.

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC)

The UNFPA Country Office has built alliances and forged strategic partnerships with the Islamic Population and Development Network (RIPD) of the Islamic Community in Congo (COMICO), the National Confederation of the Islamic Youth of Congo (CNJIC), leaders of major religious denominations in the DRC (Catholic, Protestant, Kimbanguiste, the Salvation Army and Revivalist Churches), coalition members on repositioning family planning and social reintegration of women cured of obstetric fistula. In partnership with the Interior Ministry, UNFPA works with the leaders of the National Association of Traditional Leaders to engage in the fight against GBV, including early marriage and sexual violence.

UNFPA trained 230 community-based leaders in the distribution of contraceptives and agents or community volunteers belonging to different religious denominations to support the provision of reproductive health and family planning interventions and community-based outreach, research, and guidance of female carriers of obstetric fistula to the care centers.

Best practices and innovative partnerships in this area include convening the heads of major religious denominations to issue a joint statement in support of family planning. In the same vein, 10 Congolese stars of international fame have recorded a song about family planning. A famous musician made a statement against sexual violence which helped mobilize national opinion. Moreover, the imams of the DRC made a statement in support of condom use by young people to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS.

UNFPA supported the Central Service of Life Education (SCEV), a national NGO Catholic obedience, to integrate the teaching of the course of comprehensive sex education/education to life in over 20,000 primary and secondary schools. At the same time, the awareness campaigns targeting the basic ecclesial communities were made through parishes.

GUINEA

Value-based and faith-based organizations have been engaged by UNFPA Guinea in multi-faith efforts through concrete collaboration and field activities:

- Involvement of the Religious Leaders Associations in female genital mutilation (FGM) prevention activities in the context of the Ebola virus disease;
- Participation of the Religious Leaders Associations to the GBV Sub-Cluster's activities involving representatives of government, national and international NGOs, local human rights organizations and UN agencies;
- Promotion of a culture of peace, mutual understanding and cooperation through mediation, reconciliation and dialogue among ethnic, cultural or religious groups.

Moreover, the UNFPA Country Office has carried out activities which address and foster the links between cultural diversity, dialogue and development, including in conflict and post-conflict situations. For instance, youths and women who have been trained for community sociocultural activities and citizenship were involved in order to address denial and reluctance in the fight against the spread of the Ebola virus.

Targeted activities in the areas of youth, education, media and migrations include training of girls from underprivileged areas on professional and development activities for generating income, promotion of reproductive rights, family planning, prevention of HIV/AIDS, and early child marriage.

KENYA

UNFPA Kenya recognizes the role of strategic partners such as religious and cultural leaders as key agents of change in communities. These partners have a deep understanding of communities and are able to create a platform and opportunities for dialogue on issues of interest to UNFPA, for example maternal health, GBV, including harmful cultural practices such as FGM and early marriages, which partly contribute to underdevelopment and conflicts in communities.

This is why the Kenya Country Office engages systematically in inter-cultural and inter-religious activities. Areas of engagement over the 2015-2016 time period include the following:

- Capacity building of cultural and religious leaders (through UNFPA support) has led to enhanced community dialogue on maternal health, GBV, including FGM and early marriages. As a result, the cultural and religious leaders have made public declarations on abandonment of FGM in their communities. They have also facilitated social integration of girls which has led to reconciliation of girls and harmony in families being realized.
- The Country Office facilitated and supported a high level inter-faith dialogue in March 2015, to address issues of maternal health and harmful traditional practices in six counties with the highest burden of maternal mortality. This culminated in a signed Call for Action by the religious leaders to address the promotion of family planning, sexual and

reproductive health (SRH), and the abandonment of harmful traditional practices of FGM and child marriage.

- UNFPA Kenya has been promoting behavioral change and information on reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health (RMNCAH) amongst young people and the community. For instance, as a result of awareness creation for girls and mentorship programs, over 5,000 girls have undergone Alternative Rites of Passage (ARP) with support from UNFPA. The girls, as well as boys are encouraged to go to school by their teachers as well as the religious and cultural leaders.
- The Country Office has also worked with both religious and community leaders to mark international days such as the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, World Population day and 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence Campaign.
- Capacity building of the “Morans” (young warriors) on FGM concerns has led to retention in school of Morans and has prevented them from engaging in cattle rustling – one major source of conflict in many communities. As a result, the Ilchamus and the Samburus Morans, from north rift region in Kenya, through the UNFPA support, are creating awareness in their communities on harmful traditional practices and preaching peace. Some of them have gone to school and are married to girls who have not undergone FGM.
- The Country Office has also facilitated peace talks and reconciliation in focus counties where inter-clan conflicts are prevalent.

Best practices and innovative partnerships include the facilitation and support of forums for the inter-religious council of Kenya to convene and assess critical issues that contribute to preventable maternal mortality and morbidity, and increased sensitization on Family Planning and population dynamics as a development agenda. UNFPA Kenya has also partnered with the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution as well as cultural and community leaders to enhance identification and prosecution of perpetrators of FGM and child marriage. UNFPA has pioneered working with scholars from the Islamic faith to interpret child spacing from a Qur’anic perspective.

Plans and prospects for **future action** in this field are framed within a commitment to continuous engagement at national, sub-national and grassroots levels to empower religious leaders to prioritize women’s health and to include this theme in sermons at places of worship, and to work with cultural leaders, men and boys towards the abandonment of FGM and child marriage. UNFPA Kenya is also committed to ensure the allocation of resources and partnerships with cultural leaders and county governments, for community-based activities which address gender issues. UNFPA Kenya will seek to engage religious leaders in the prevention of radicalization of young people as it pertains to the attainment of the Demographic Dividend and in partnership with the Government of Kenya and UNESCO, and to work with these leaders to review the education curriculum to identify gaps for appropriate inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education.

MAURITANIA

UNFPA, in partnership with UNICEF and World Vision, launched the National Citizens' Hearing on preventing neo-natal and maternal deaths, as part of World Vision's Global Week of Action (GWA) in May 2015. The Ministry of Health officially launched the GWA, while World Vision carried out a country-wide social mobilization and sensitization campaign aimed at getting to zero neo-natal and maternal deaths in the next few years. The National Citizens' Hearing was attended by civil society, women's groups, Government Ministries of Health, Children's & Family Affairs, and religious leaders.

SOMALIA

UNFPA, as chair of the Somalia Working Group on GBV Prevention and Response, has worked to empower humanitarian actors with the skills and competencies necessary to produce culturally sensitive messages in concerted efforts to turn the tide against GBV. The strategy and approach entailed providing space for public discussions and positive messaging that promotes a harmonious relationship between women and men using the pristine teachings of the Qur'an and the sayings of the holy Prophet Mohammed. Of the 150 preferred messages developed from this training process, those that resonated most were the positive messages based on Islamic teachings about men and women being equal; both were created from a single soul, and that men and women were designed to protect one another from harm and suffering.

The messages on the need for FGM abandonment, dangers of the practice, and roles of each community members in accelerating change for the abandonment of the practice were disseminated by broadcasting daily prior and after the news bulletin for 4 months. This helped to capture a wider audience – it is estimated that approximately 1,000,000 community members were reached through the 1 Nation radio engagement.

Moreover, the UNFPA Country Office facilitated public dialogues through use of poetry, drama and songs with FGM abandonment messages, which facilitated public debates through radio programs and community dialogues. Over 800,000 community members participated in the dialogue sessions organized by the community champions, religious leaders, youth advocates, Youth peer Networks and council of elders which included use of community caravans and circus.

Furthermore, training of female lawyers and religious leaders has been carried out as lead champions on abandonment of all forms of FGM.

UGANDA

The Uganda Country Office has worked with World Vision as an implementing partner since 2014 to deliver on the objectives of the “UN Commission for Life-Saving Commodities”, and to jointly realize the objectives of the Secretary-General's Strategy for Every Woman Every Child. The Commission identified and endorsed an initial list of 13 overlooked life-saving commodities which, if more widely accessed and properly used, could save the lives of more than 6 million

women and children globally. The Commission also identified key, interrelated barriers which prevent access to and use of the 13 commodities and recommended 10 time-bound actions to address them. These focus on the need for improved global and local markets for life-saving commodities, innovative financing, quality strengthening, regulatory efficiency, improved national delivery of commodities, and better integration of private sector and consumer needs.

Another example of the Country Office's activities with regard to faith-based engagement was the Marathon to End FGM in Kapchorwa Community, organized by UNFPA in collaboration with the Church of Uganda. More than 200 runners and about 5,000 visitors participated in the event, which took place on the International Day of the Girl Child in October 2016. President Museveni was represented by the Minister in the Presidency, Hon Esther Mbayo. Moreover, some members of Parliaments were in attendance as well as the chief host of the event, Archbishop of Uganda Arch Stanley Ntagali, and the Bishop of the Diocese of Sebei.

ARAB STATES

ALGERIA

Part of the UNFPA Algeria cooperation program with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments, and in coordination with the Ministry of Health, has focused on building the capacity of 100 mourchidates (women religious guides/counsellors) in providing advice on issues of reproductive health and family planning throughout the nation.

The aim is to involve these mourchidates, who play a vital role in the outreach to communities and advocacy, in providing counselling and guidance for girls and women in particular, as well as for society in general, in order to strengthen universal access to reproductive health and family planning. The second phase involved creating a national network of mourchidates as part of the reproductive health service providers – including family planning services.

This experience was a highlight for the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments, which identified the following priorities:

- Institutionalizing trainings in counselling in reproductive health and family planning in the curriculum of the mourchidates;
- Strengthening an inter-sectoral approach, especially between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Religious Affairs;
- Institutionalizing mourchidates' networks within national reproductive health service provider networks;
- Strengthening the capacity of Imams in counselling on issues of reproductive health and family planning;
- Developing communication capabilities, including the use of media at national and local level (press, TV, radio etc.).

Moreover, in the context of South-South cooperation, UNFPA supported the participation of a representative of the Ministry of Religious Affairs at the workshop on strategic partnership in family planning with Muslim religious leaders, held from 25 to 30 April 2016 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. In this exchange, UNFPA guided and explained to the participants the importance of sharing the Algerian experience with a view to adapting to the local context of similar trainings in Indonesia.

EGYPT

UNFPA Egypt has collaborated with the Islamic Centre for Population Studies and Research (IICPSR) of Al-Azhar University on the development of a manual on GBV in the context of Islam. “The GBV manual in the context of Islam” covers the various forms of GBV victims face (among them FGM), and was launched and printed in 2016. This new holistic document on GBV will be utilized as the basis for the capacity building program for religious leaders in addition to the

previously produced manuals. Following a mapping prepared by Al-Azhar of all the medium and large mosques in Assiut, Sohag and Greater Cairo, a capacity building training began mid 2016 for religious leaders including both male and female preachers.

In 2015, UNFPA moreover continued training Christian religious leaders, targeting 1,701 priests, pastors and other church leaders from the Coptic, Evangelical and Catholic churches in selected areas of Greater Cairo, Assiut and Sohag. In addition, 20 step-down seminars were conducted in 2015. A training curriculum and other FGM materials were developed to accompany the training and step down seminars. In 2015, 308 churches were capacitated to protect and respond to GBV (including FMG) within the communities they serve. This intervention built the capacity of priests and service leaders to protect and respond to GBV within the communities they serve. The focus of the program is to enhance capacities of these duty bearers to convince communities and households (through sermons, disseminated messages, teachings, and family counselling) to abandon violence against women and girls with specific emphasis on FGM, and to select champions trained religious leaders on FGM and GBV to further advocate against FGM and GBV.

Best practices and innovative partnerships include collaborating with the National Population Council to conduct capacity building workshops for law enforcement agents on FGM which comprises a session on FGM in religion and Islam. This session was facilitated by the Egyptian Dar El-Iftaa. Although not related to law enforcement, this session has become a key component of the training. This session spurred a lot of debate and interest by the prosecutors, judges and forensic experts. Indeed, the training has a double aim: on the one hand to raise the capacity of the law enforcement agents on the legal issues surrounding FGM, on the other to engage them through working on their own personal conviction specifically on the highly debatable Hadith on FGM.

UNFPA has been targeting female religious leaders since 2011. Female religious leaders are a key target group to reach women, adolescents and girls. After graduation from Al-Azhar University, female religious leaders unlike their male counterparts are not affiliated to key religious institutions and do not benefit from regular trainings. After the success of the training of female religious leaders on the “Preacher’s Manual: In the Area of Population Policy, Reproductive Health and Gender” in 2016, UNFPA will be training female religious leaders on the “GBV manual in the context of Islam”.

Plans or prospects for future action in this field include collaborating with the National Council for Women (NCW) to adapt the key messages of the “GBV manual in the context of Islam” for use in their educational and outreach work on gender and Islam. The content and religious interpretations in the document will be the basis for the NCW’s awareness raising and attitude change programs on gender and Islam. One of the central areas which will be targeted through this program will be the enhancement of messages in school curriculums around Islam and gender roles and attitudes.

MOROCCO

UNFPA Morocco Country Office started working with the local FBO “Rabita Mohamedia des Oulama” (Muhammadia Network of Religious Scholars) in 2010. Between 2015 and 2016, UNFPA and Rabita Mohammadia of Ulemas have realized a study entitled “An Inventory of concepts in the Qur'an and Sunnah calling for non-violence against women”.

In partnership with UNFPA Morocco, the Rabita Mohammadia of Ulemas presented in March 2016 the results of a study which seeks to identify concepts in the Qur'an and Sunnah clearly advocating against violence against women. The study was conducted by Dr Hakima El Hatri, expert on the family code and gender, and professor in the Faculty of Sharia, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fez. It aims to analyze and explain the concepts and provisions contained in the Qur'an and Sunnah in relation to fighting violence against women in order to extract the many calls for justice, equality, dignity and tolerance, and to submit an explanatory reading to some concepts interpreted wrongly by the general public as inciting violence. The study comes as part of a partnership between UNFPA and the Rabita Mohammadia of Ulemas to improve reproductive health and the fight against GBV, based on a scientific approach derived from social science as well as the science of Islamic jurisprudence. More than 80 persons representing government departments, civil society, universities, sister agencies, and donors attended the technical meeting and contributed to the debate.

Moreover, in partnership with Al-Azhar University Islamic Centre for Population Studies and under the auspices of the Grand Imam Prof Dr Ahmed Muhammad El-Tayeb, Sheikh of Al-Azhar, the UNFPA Arab States Regional Office (ASRO) has organized a workshop for Arab FBOs, including religious leaders from thirteen Arab countries, to solicit their opinions and ideas on how the ICPD agenda could be integrated into the international development agenda beyond 2015. This platform has also been used as an advocacy skills' development opportunity for FBOs on issues related ICPD and international development agenda beyond 2015. In addition, ASRO has utilized this intervention to make sure issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are well backed by FBOs discourse and actions in the Arab Region. To enrich the discussion and make it more inclusive, ASRO has invited UN agencies, INGOs, various Arab women NGOs, individual population experts and journalist from across the region.

ASIA

AFGHANISTAN

In order to respond to misperceptions about family planning in Islam in Afghanistan – a main barrier to uptake of family planning – UNFPA has partnered with religious leaders since 2012. UNFPA has been supporting advocacy and training events during the 2015-2019 program cycle, in partnership with the Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs, the Ulam High Council, the Afghanistan Academy of Science, and the Ministry of Public Health. UNFPA has also been partnering with institutes undertaking religious leaders training programs to institutionalize the concept of family planning in Islam.

BANGLADESH

UNFPA Bangladesh has partnered with the main education institute for Imam training to incorporate reproductive health and family planning into the Imam training curriculum. The Country Office supports ongoing training of eminent religious scholars. Approximately 2,600 religious leaders have been sensitized on the prevention of GBV and child marriage. Imams have conducted meetings with a special focus on the negative impact of child marriage and GBV, and in some districts Imam-led committees have been formed to address these issues. UNFPA and community members have sensitized teachers in Madrashas about the importance of education on SRHR and gender equality for adolescents. In 2015, the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) curriculum was approved by the Ministry of Education and National Curriculum and Textbook Board. GEMS can now be used in Ministry of Education Madrashas all over the country.

BHUTAN

The UNFPA Country Office partnered with Bhutan Nuns Foundation, a non-profit organization, to address girls' and women's reproductive health issues and GBV through the implementation of life skills education with a focus on strengthening the institutional capacity of nunneries to empower nuns to advocate for SRH and gender equality. As a result, trained nuns have proactively reached out to rural communities with information on SRH and the prevention of GBV, and the initiative is now being extended into monasteries.

INDONESIA

UNFPA Indonesia organized a seminar and group discussion on FGM, called Social-Cultural and Health Perspectives, attended by government officials, religious leaders, health professionals, and human rights activists. The seminar took note of the current sensitivities related to this topic and recognized it as a significant health concern which can impact the SRH and wellbeing of women and girls. The seminar also identified the need for key government agencies to address this practice.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Young Women’s Christian Association PNG, supported by UNFPA, is responsible for producing the Tokstret radio program which broadcasts throughout the country. The program has contributed to breaking down barriers and harmful attitudes to SRH. It is planned that Tokstret will be mainstreamed into the National Broadcasting Corporation of Papua New Guinea’s regular radio programming.

THE PHILIPPINES

The UNFPA Country Office advocated for a fatwa, “Model Family in Islam”, which tackles early and forced marriages, GBV, comprehensive gender and health education for the youth, and pre-marriage counselling. In Mindanao, UNFPA contributed to strengthening the service delivery network and awareness among leaders of the indigenous communities to improve access of indigenous communities to quality care and facilitated birth registration of members of indigenous communities. In partnership with the Commission on Population, UNFPA supported activities for teens to learn about SRH using indigenous languages.

TIMOR-LESTE

With the support of the UNFPA Country Office in Timor-Leste, the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Church have held a number of public events emphasizing birth spacing as a key component of responsible parenthood.

MYANMAR

In 2014, Myanmar conducted a Population and Housing Census for the first time in over three decades. A conflict-sensitive approach was adopted with a focus on capacity building, participatory engagement and education of civil society. FBOs were identified as critical target groups, confirmed by findings from community consultations, which indicated that interfaith organizations were perceived as a strong network to build social cohesion around the census. Prior to the launch of the census results, UNFPA funded and provided technical assistance to develop a wide-reaching awareness raising program to build ownership and understanding of the census and its importance for development. Faith-based and interfaith organizations are important stakeholders because, in the absence of government social structures, they provide social services and can use census data to develop programs in their respective communities. Religious leaders are also perceived as trusted information providers in their communities.

UNFPA Myanmar, and its team of conflict sensitivity advisors, consulted with eminent religious leaders and FBOs throughout 2014 and 2015, establishing a dialogue around the census process and the use of census data. UNFPA provided training for leaders from the Myanmar Council of Churches, Catholic Church, Methodist Church, Baptist Church, Hindu and Sikh communities, and Muslim Councils, associations and leaders to prepare their communities for the launch of the

census results, and to open dialogue on ways in which data could be useful for development. Importantly, sensitivities and mitigation measures around the release of census data on religion and ethnicity were discussed. UNFPA held three bilateral meetings with eminent monks, with a large following, to discuss the value of census data for social development and to gather their views on the issue of religion, and how to support efforts against hate speech and discrimination. Moreover, a workshop was held in Yangon with interfaith civil society organizations (CSOs) from Kayin, Mon, Rakhine, Sagaing and Mandalay States/Regions, which established a network of grassroots CSOs that were informed about the census and could provide support and information as needed.

In 2016, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon during his visit in Myanmar met with the country's religious leaders. Supported by UNFPA, and hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the meeting aimed to promote the inclusion of both majority and minority religious groups in Myanmar's peace and development processes. The meeting builds on Government and UNFPA consultations with faith leaders prior to the release of census data on religion earlier in 2016. The faith leaders used the opportunity to speak directly with the UN Secretary-General to express their commitment to peaceful co-existence. "I count on your leadership to show the way towards solidarity and unity in Myanmar", the Secretary-General told the representatives of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Bahá'í and interfaith networks. "I share with you a belief in the greater good of humankind, regardless of religious affiliation."

In a different area, UNFPA, together with a local priest from the Catholic Church in Paletwa, Chin State, distributed UNFPA's Dignity Kits and blankets, as well as identified persons to train to provide psychosocial services to GBV survivors, following the floods of 2015. UNFPA also initiated a partnership with Karuna Mission Social Solidarity (KMSS), a national FBO, to integrate reproductive health and GBV in to their program in Northern Shan State, which targets internally displaced persons. UNFPA has supported the participation of KMSS staff in a learning exchange organized by the UN System Staff College.

Best practices, in this area include dedicated time and dialogue with FBOs, using a conflict sensitivity lens to dispel misconceptions and showcase the importance of census data, which has been invaluable. The three-day workshop modality with faith-based groups built ownership and understanding around the census data. These dialogues also allowed UNFPA to capture views from those that work closely with their communities, particularly with regard to the release of sensitive data. The activities established a trusted network of faith-based leaders and inter-faith organizations which UNFPA can build on in the future.

In terms of the humanitarian response, religious leaders and FBOs are working closely with their communities and are aware of their reality and needs. The partnership with UNFPA ensures that responses are timely and relevant for affected populations.

Future prospects include activities to intensify dissemination and use of census data, moving into district and township level training of local level development actors, including FBOs. The trainings will be conducted by the Government with the support of UNFPA.

NEPAL

The UNFPA Country Office in Nepal has been combatting child marriage by mobilizing religious leaders to advocate against it. In Nepal, around a quarter of girls aged 15 to 19 are currently married or in union, according to a 2014 survey – even though the legal minimum age of marriage in Nepal is 20. Supported by UNFPA Nepal, priests, astrologers, shamans, and other spiritual leaders are working to turn the side.

UNFPA and the Government's Department of Women and Children are engaging these leaders on the issue of child marriage through workshops and other collaborations in a number of districts, including Baitadi and neighboring Dadeldhura. The faith leaders have developed action plans to eliminate child marriage in their communities. They are also educating their communities about the harms of child marriage, adolescent pregnancy and GBV, and they are calling on parents to keep their daughters in school.

EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

ARMENIA

Within its Gender-Transformative Programming, the Armenia Country Office continued its close cooperation with FBOs on prevention of GBV in Armenian families by engaging the Armenian Apostolic Church (ACC) in combating gender stereotypes and violent behaviors through educational, awareness-raising and counseling activities. Specifically, the Armenian Apostolic Church's active participation has been supported in the ongoing public discourse on gender and family wellness issues in Armenia since 2014; selected population groups of eight regions were sensitized on the topics of women's rights, gender stereotypes, gender equality and GBV by the AAC priests and trainers; and skills and knowledge of the priests and adjacent trainers were strengthened for GBV prevention and provision of moral support and guidance to families and individuals suffered from GBV.

Educational and awareness raising activities included working with groups, families and individuals through awareness raising and moral support activities in the communities, including education sessions at schools and army units, paying home visits to families and providing consultations to couples, newly-weds, and individuals in order to sensitize on gender issues and prevent violence.

Lessons Learned: Working in pairs with a gender-expert trainer proved to be more beneficial in order to include more diverse methodology for better impact, specifically in analyzing the process of stereotyped perception. Regular trainings for capacity development are needed at every phase. The regular meetings with the priests proved to be productive since they had the opportunity to continuously check with experts and with each other if they were on the right direction, and if the methodologies they use work, as well as they could highlight the nuances of difficult cases that they encounter mainly at the individual and family visits. It is still comparably new that priests talk directly to people outside of a church setting in Armenia. The impact already shows itself with more people approaching to the priests with individual and confidential questions.

BELARUS

In 2015, the UNFPA Country Office in Belarus held two meetings with the officials of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches to discuss possible areas of cooperation. Both confessions are highly interested to continue (as in case of the Orthodox Church) or to engage into cooperation (as in case of Catholics) with UN agencies and UNFPA in particular in the area of GBV and domestic violence.

In 2014, UNFPA in Belarus started supporting the Charity Sisterhood Union (a structural department of the Belarusian Orthodox Church) to enhance its capacities in addressing domestic violence, and facilitate the integration of these kinds of services (provided by the Orthodox sisterhood) into existing models of national legal and social support to survivors of domestic

violence. Over 155 FBO youth volunteers have been trained on issues on domestic violence and family using a training manual elaborated within the project for work with religious communities, who themselves have carried out thematic activities throughout the country. The set-up of an online thematic webpage (www.mirdomu.sestra.by) was also made possible.

The project also supported the work of shelter for survivors of domestic violence, established by the Lida Orthodox Sisterhood (Hrodna Oblast, Belarus). Abused women and children receive social and psychological assistance in the shelter, and are being offered accommodation and meals, as well as psychological and social support during their stay in the shelter. Services provided by Lida Orthodox Sisterhood are integrated into multi-sectoral mechanism of response to domestic violence.

KAZAKHSTAN

The partnership of UNFPA in Kazakhstan with religious leaders and FBOs of the two dominating religious communities in Kazakhstan, Sunni Islam and Orthodox Christianity, was established through building their capacities, knowledge and understanding issues related to maternal and reproductive health, family planning, HIV, GBV, early marriages and non-discrimination of people living with HIV and other key populations.

Religious leaders of Sunni Islam and Orthodox Christianity in Kazakhstan are engaged into advocacy for and dissemination of information on maternal health, SRH, prevention of HIV and GBV and early marriages for their followers and congregation. They are actively involved into the development of informational, educational and communicational (IEC) materials addressing maternal health, women's and girls' SRH, GBV issues, including early marriage. The IEC materials, supported by quotations from each religion's respective teachings and doctrines, were approved by heads of religious organizations, translated into both Russian and Kazakh versions, and printed and disseminated among their followers. Active religious leaders of Sunni Islam and Orthodox Christianity developed appropriate sermons messages on GBV and child marriage prevention to be held in churches and mosques.

FBOs in Kazakhstan engaged into the policy dialogue with government and civil society organizations on joining efforts and creation of partnership on issues of ensuring SRHR and the prevention of early marriages, early pregnancies and GBV.

Lessons Learned:

- The involvement of religious leaders into the public and state events, underlining the importance of FBOs' role in the strengthening the health and well-being of population encourages them to cooperate with medical institutions and international organizations.
- Improving the FBOs' knowledge on GBV, maternal health, and reproductive health issues triggered interest of Islam leaders to introduce a special teaching course on these issues into the educational curricula in madrasahs (religious schools).

- There is a need to create the sustainability of knowledge sharing among FBO staff on issues of maternal health, SRHR, GBV issues, and human rights.

KYRGYZSTAN

The UNFPA Country Office completed the implementation of two peace-building projects, “Multi-sectoral cooperation for inter-ethnic peace building in Kyrgyzstan”, in February 2016.

Activities undertaken which are intercultural or interreligious in nature include the development of a Community Action Toolkit which was published in both Russian and Kyrgyz language. In addition, ten 4-days trainings on peace-building and prevention of any forms of violence were conducted for religious leaders, community leaders and representatives of local self-governments in 14 communities of Osh, Batken, Issyk-Kul and Talas provinces in 2015. The religious leaders, community leaders, and representatives of local self-governments were equipped with the information about peace-building and conflict prevention and encouraged to take actions in their communities, build networks and coalitions with like-minded people and communities, promote a culture of peace and jointly take actions to address violence, including GBV.

Women religious leaders reported that they built good relations with representatives of local self-governments, police officers and community leaders, and continued to interact with them after the trainings in their everyday activities related to inter-ethnic and inter-religious peace-building. Many participants of the trainings reported that it was the first time they came together as such a mixed group in order to have a multilateral dialogue. They often had debates at the beginning on different issues, but throughout the discussion they found common ground to work together and promote tolerance in their communities and peaceful resolution of arising issues and conflicts. The trainings not only provided participants with the information, but also provided them with a platform for discussions, debates, joint analysis of the problems in their communities, and joint planning for community actions.

Five regional-level festivals and one national cultural festival were conducted for youth from communities and madrasahs. Intercultural youth festivals engaged youth from communities and madrasahs, helping them to build strong cross-cultural relationships, and providing them with a purpose and active roles, and opportunities and skills for dignifying one another through communication. In three of the five provinces, young participants reported they will independently replicate similar events in their respective communities.

Best practices and innovative partnerships include a research in madrasahs which was carried out to explore opportunities to introduce an Education for Peace Program (EPP) into madrasahs. The EPP curriculum was developed and validated through a one-day workshop with 40 madrasah directors and teachers, three three-days trainings and follow up two two-days practice development seminars for teachers of madrasahs. The EPP subject, which combines modern conflict resolution theory with religious teachings and ethics, was included into the existing curricula of three madrasahs as a pilot in 2015.

The principals and teachers of 40 madrasahs, while providing critical feedback on some sensitive issues, nevertheless highly praised both the contents of the program as well as interactive teaching methodology suggested, which encourages students to speak up, use critical thinking in learning, be more active in ending violence, be a positive role model, and intervene and support the victims of violence. The majority of them also strongly recommended that all other madrasah subjects should be taught using similar modern inter-active methods.

In future, while working with Muslim authorities in 2016, the UNFPA will follow up and monitor how many madrasahs of those initially interested include the Peace for Education subject in their programs.

SERBIA

The Serbia Country Office was part of the UN Human Security Trust Fund JP 2013-2015 in Southwest Serbia, and also supported grassroots activities that foster interethnic, interreligious and intercultural cooperation in four multicultural regions of Serbia among young people of Serbian, Hungarian, Romanian (Vlachian), Roma, Bosniak, and Albanian ethnicity.

Backbone of the activities are theatre based education shows with a key message that violence has no justification regardless of gender, age, religion, ethnicity nor any other factors. Young people from various ethnic and religious backgrounds are jointly participating in activities, both as cast in the shows and as the audience. Scenarios for the shows were carefully developed by a team of psychologists, so as to ensure that youth go through topics gradually. Firstly, topics are presented in a humorous manner, gradually leading them towards real implications and seriousness of GBV, reproductive health etc. Shows were rewarded as an example of EU best practices.

Lessons learned and successes: Professional actors are performing in the shows, and this approach proved to be very successful. Involving national celebrities attracts greater audience, while involvement of local actors ensures sustainability. 80% of the 7,000 high school students (and some young people in out of school situations such as Roma settlements) who participated in the show and discussions have improved or all together changed their knowledge and stance on reproductive health and rights in the contexts of their communities, and related GBV and discrimination.

The activities were carried out with the broader idea that strengthening of inter-ethnic understanding, community cohesion, education and civic participation of youth will further contribute to reducing the risk of conflict and enhanced intercultural and interreligious dialogue in the communities. It is also contributing to better understanding of SHRH, GBV and issues pertaining to the UNFPA mandate.

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

The UNFPA Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (LACRO), together with the various UNFPA Country Offices across the region, focused significant time and attention on building alliances with religious leaders and FBOs in support of the ICPD 2014 review of the Programme of Action, as well as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In March 2015, UNFPA supported the Latin American and the Caribbean Interreligious Alliance for 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and organized regional activities in the context of the regional and global conversations on the 2030 Agenda. For example, the Second Regional Fora on Inequalities and Exclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean was held in São Paulo, Brazil. The event was attended by more than 35 religious leaders from various denominations of Christianity (Roman Catholic, Anglican Church, Lutherans, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Pentecostal, Orthodox Church), Islam, Judaism, indigenous and Afro spiritualities. Moreover, authorities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Secretary of the Presidency on behalf of the Government of Brazil attended the event. The leaders agreed to advocate and raise awareness for the reduction of social inequalities, the full exercise of human rights, and called for more attention to the issue of youth as a key partners for the implementation of the SDG Agenda.

As a result of this initiative, a FBOs platform for advocacy and policy dialogue was established to mobilize their leaders in support to the implementation of the ICPD Agenda and the 2030 Agenda, through their participation at regional and global conferences, fora and meetings, during selected events of the intergovernmental negotiations around the new development agenda post 2015, and particularly to call the attention to those SDGs which are linked with inequalities and exclusion affecting children, girls, adolescents, youth, and women. For example, as part of the activities supported for this platform, a parallel session was organized in New York in June 2015 on “Informal Interactive Dialogue on Addressing Inequality and Exclusion in the post 2015 Development Agenda”, with the ambassadors of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) during the 4th round of negotiations. CLAI had the opportunity to call the attention on the issue of health (SDG 3) as a fundamental human right and central topic for social cohesion, including Reproductive Health for adolescents and young people, taking into account the impact of teen pregnancy in the region as well as the importance of the access to a comprehensive sexuality education for all, including mothers and fathers.

In 2015, the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) was very active to position at national and regional levels the issues emerged from the ICPD beyond 2014, including the regional intergovernmental declaration (known as Consensus of Montevideo) and its linkages with the 2030 Agenda. For example, CLAI updated the tool kit elaborated in 2013 (“Advocacy for FBOs leaders on Poverty, Migration, Sexual and Reproductive Rights; Rights and Sexual and Reproductive Health for Young People; Gender Equality and Women Leaders – Manual for Facilitators”), including a module related the linkages between the ICPD, the Montevideo Consensus, and the new SDGs.

Over 400 FBO members and religious leaders were trained from the four regional secretaries of the CLAI: Rio de la Plata, which include Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay; Brazil; the Caribbean and Gran Colombia-Cuba and Colombia; and Mexico and Mesoamerica (Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador). This process resulted in regional and national work plans which included activities related to at least two of the selected proposed SDGs by CLAI (Poverty, Health, Education, Gender Equality, Reducing Inequalities and Partnerships for Goals), ensuring that the ICPD agenda and the SDGs are being translated into their own plans. The leaders and communities were included in this implementation contributing with CSOs, local and national governments.

In July 2015, CLAI conducted a Continental Consultation in Panama, to analyze the linkages between the Consensus of Montevideo and the SDGs, particularly in the area of human rights, adolescents and youth, SRH and GBV; reviewing experiences, barriers and opportunities for the regional social pacts for equality in the region as well as the role and modalities of FBOs to support the implementation of the new development agenda. An outcome document emerged of this consultation – the “Consensus of Panama” – which was endorsed by 40 religious leaders on behalf of 180 churches members of CLAI (influencing around three million of Christian believers), expressing their commitment to continue supporting the ICPD Agenda and Agenda 2030.

CARIBBEAN

In the Caribbean, where adolescent pregnancy is a public policy concern for sustainable development, UNFPA has played a key leadership role to support the development and implementation of The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Integrated Strategic Framework 2014-2019 to Reduce Adolescent Pregnancy, HIV prevention, and a Regional Parenting Education Strategy. Removing cultural and legal barriers to ensure the full access to SRH services and commodities for young people is still a challenge in the region. UNFPA had promoted an open dialogue with Caribbean FBOs and religious leaders, targeting the countries with highest level of teen pregnancies, by organizing a series of webinars to sensitize them on the importance of the Regional Integrated Framework to reduce Adolescent Pregnancy and facilitate their collaboration and information sharing of evidence-based programs that have assisted communities in lowering teen pregnancy, and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. The key outcomes include the establishment of a core group of FBOs, which was supported to develop an advocacy brochure for FBOs to address teen pregnancy in the region. These efforts resulted in greater awareness by religious leaders on youth issues and in increased collaboration among FBOs to advocate for the implementation of the Caribbean Integrated Strategic Framework to reduce adolescent pregnancy.

COSTA RICA

UNFPA continues to build alliances with CSOs as well as local and national governments to advocate for the incorporation of young people human rights and needs, including SRHR, using

human rights, gender and culturally sensitive approaches in the national policies plans and legal frameworks. In Costa Rica, CLAI was a member of the “National Table for Dialogue on SDGs between Government and CSOs”, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This space was offering an opportunity to advocate for social justice and stress that the inclusive participation of a broad range of partners, such as CSOs, including FBOs, academia, private sector, as well as youth, women, indigenous and African descendants leaders, is critical to ensure development processes and the full implementation of the global and regional agendas related to the ICPD beyond 2014 and the SDGs. CLAI also contributed to review the National Development Plan leading by the Ministry of Planning, emphasizing the need to invest on women and girls, adolescents and young people.

ECUADOR

UNFPA Ecuador works with social organizations such as Cofan and Kichwa nationalities of the Amazon, Chachi and Afro nationalities of Esmeraldas, located along the northern border between Ecuador and Colombia, on issues related to SRH, including family planning, HIV, and GBV, particularly addressing adolescent and youth population.

The Country Office has been developing the following actions:

- UNFPA Ecuador along with UNICEF, UNHCR, UNDP and WFP, is implementing the Interagency Human Security Programme, which includes a component of SRH and aims to help create conditions for the exercise of the rights of people in territories of conflict as the northern border between Ecuador and Colombia.
- The UNFPA country office has supported networks against GBV, which are formed of government institutions and civil society in the northern border between Ecuador and Colombia, including indigenous and afro Ecuadorian organizations. In this framework, routes for access to justice and health, including SRH, for victims of GBV were developed.
- The Country Office has trained midwives and organized community workers in the development of birth plan and recognition of danger signs of obstetric emergencies. The SRH Intercultural Health Model was strengthened, and midwifery rooms with intercultural relevance, including training and awareness of health staff, were adopted. Innovative methodologies for training community workers and health personnel in SSR with intercultural approach were developed (see handbook "Let us beware to Well Living").
- UNFPA Ecuador has supported the FBO Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) to develop methodologies and training processes with youth and religious leaders on sexual rights, reproductive rights and the right to a life free of GBV.

EL SALVADOR

In El Salvador, UNFPA supported CLAI in partnership with youth regional platforms ELIGE (Youth Network for Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Mexico) and REDLAC (Latin America and the Caribbean Youth Network for Sexual and Reproductive Rights) to carry out a training of

trainers workshop for 35 youth leaders – girls and boys –, members of national FBOs youth networks from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras on prevention, treatment and care of GBV, including sexual violence and the prevention of adolescent pregnancy. Currently, these youth leaders are volunteers to support young migrants and provide counselling on GBV, working at community level, particularly along the borders.

GUATEMALA

UNFPA supported CLAI in Latin America, through the Pastoral of Women, Social Justice and Gender, to develop a collaborative research among women who have been victims of GBV, including sexual violence. At the end of the research, a workshop was conducted in Guatemala to share the results of the research with the members of the Pastoral and CLAI authorities. At the end of the activity, a declaration statement emerged reaffirming the commitment to continue promoting human rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and gender equality. As a result of this initiative, the Executive Board of CLAI agreed to develop its own Policy on gender equality.

HONDURAS

In Honduras, UNFPA supported the elaboration of the National Plan for the Prevention of the Adolescent Pregnancy and the Multi-sectoral Plan for the Prevention of the Adolescent Pregnancy, under the leadership of the Office of the First Lady, in coordination with the Ministries of Health and Education. Both plans were developed through a consultative process, including young people, CSOs as well as FBOs and religious leaders. CLAI, supported by UNFPA, played a critical role to facilitate an open dialogue with other FBOs, religious leaders and key stakeholders to advocate for the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education into these plans, as one of the pillars for adolescent pregnancy prevention, providing evidence-based resources for adolescent's health as well as sharing their educational tools on this topic. This participation contributed to ensure the incorporation of young people needs, the human rights-based approaches, respect for diversity, and comprehensive sexuality education into these plans. Also, CLAI provided technical support and guidance on culturally sensitive approaches on the issues of CSE and contraceptives for the National Campaign on Teen Pregnancy Prevention, chaired by the First Lady of Honduras.

Also in Honduras, in response to the migration crisis of unaccompanied children in the Northern Triangle of Central America (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador) in 2015, UNFPA in alliance with religious leaders from CLAI analyzed the role of FBOs and agreed to provide support to migrants, particularly children, girls and women. UNFPA and CLAI, in coordination with the national task force leading by the First Lady of Honduras, developed concrete actions at community level for family reinsertion as well as care and counselling in the cases of GBV, including sexual violence.

Moreover, UNFPA Honduras has been working with indigenous groups, specifically with the Lenca and Garifuna (Afro-Descendant) population on SRH and GBV targeting adolescent and youth population.

UNFPA's work with the indigenous population has focused on:

- Improving the empowerment and capacity-building of indigenous youth and adolescent's population on SRHR;
- Strengthening youth and adolescents advocacy skills on SRHR, including their full and effective participation in decision making processes in these rights and matters that affect them;
- Preventing early pregnancy, HIV and AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and non-communicable diseases, by the establishment of health friendly services for youth and adolescents;
- Preventing and targeting GBV by empowering women, youth and adolescents through self-help groups acquiring knowledge of their rights and health and justice services.

NICARAGUA

In Nicaragua, 31 religious leaders of African descent strengthened their knowledge on how racial discrimination affects their SRHR. A two-day workshop, supported by UNFPA, was held in the framework of the International Decade for People of African Descent, during which 31 religious leaders (17 women and 14 men) of various religious denominations, members of CLAI, analyzed factors related to racism, the various expression of racism and how this affects their health and contributes to a culture of violence. Focus was placed on love, pardon, unity, values, tolerance and spirituality, and ways in which churches could contribute to a culture of peace. Various bible passages were selected and analyzed to aid pastors while addressing this topic in their churches. As a result, commitments were established and a declaration was developed and signed by all participants, which was shared with the media. This workshop was repeated in various municipalities of the Atlantic Coast.

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

The sub-regional Office for the Caribbean (SROC), and the Trinidad and Tobago Country Office are engaging faith-based leaders on SRH issues. In 2015, a sensitization and training of trainers workshop was convened for leaders from faith-based communities in Trinidad and Tobago on SRH. The objectives of the workshop were:

- To sensitize and build the capacity of faith-based leaders in the area of SRH (with a focus on addressing sexual and GBV and adolescent SRHR) by creating advocates within their respective communities on issues of SRH, particularly GBV and SRHR; and
- To obtain commitment from the FBO leaders to further educate other members of their faith.

UNFPA is working with the Faith-Based Network of Trinidad and Tobago, which already has a history on working on issues of SRH and has signed a declaration of commitment to support the HIV response. Other FBOs will also be invited to participate.