

**SNAPSHOTS OF UNFPA'S WORK ON INTERCULTURAL AND
INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT**

At the global level, UNFPA continues to chair the United Nations *Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith Based Organizations for the MDGs*. Under the aegis of this inter-agency partnership, UNFPA, together with UNAIDS, UNDP and WHO will co-sponsor a **Strategic Learning Exchange** for senior UN staff, around 'Faith, Development and Partnerships'. The course is offered with the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) in Turin, each year, and includes common global faith-based organizations (FBOs) as resources for the mutual policy and programmatic learning.

A tri-partite series of consultations, bringing together UN agencies with academic centres of excellence and faith-based NGOs (FBOs) to discuss actions and recommendations focusing on the relationship between religion, development and peace-building have also been convened. These consultations reflect on the challenges and lessons learned from UN development and peace-building work, where it engages with issues of religion and culture. The consultations will also result in recommendations for research and policy agendas.

In its continued efforts to sustain the process of engaging all stakeholders, in particular women and youth, in the interreligious and intercultural dialogue, UNFPA will co-sponsor the World Young Women's Christian Association's (YWCA's) International Women's Summit in July 2011, entitled "Women Creating a Safe World". The Summit will define equitable, safe and inclusive spaces and programmes for women, thus advancing CEDAW and MDG commitments.

UNFPA's work, essence and integrity of commitment is realized in the work of its offices at the regional and national/country levels. It is at these levels that national counterparts – both governmental as well as non-governmental – design, own, reconfigure and realise the fruits of the development labour. What follows is an overview of some of this work that by no means does justice to the range, depth and variety of interventions, but merely provides a snapshot.

AFRICA

UNFPA developed a **Regional Framework for Partnership with Interfaith Organizations**. A region-wide consultation was held from 20-24 September 2010, in Freetown, Sierra Leone, around “Partnering with Faith Based Organizations for the Promotion of Gender Equality and Maternal Health”. The consultation brought together 120 participants from 35 African countries, including senior government officials and members of parliament, UN Agencies (including UNFPA, UNAIDS, UNIFEM, UNICEF), religious and traditional NGOs as well as women’s and youth organizations. Based on the knowledge, experiences, best practices and lessons of partnerships with interfaith organizations shared at the workshop, UNFPA has developed Regional framework to scale up its support to programs that focus on working with FBOs for the promotion of gender equality and maternal health from 2010-2013.

Also through the Africa Regional Office (ARO), and within the framework of its **Campaign for Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality Reduction in Africa (CARMMA)**, UNFPA supports national authorities to partner with religious and traditional organization in the national launches of CARMMA - an AUC and UNFPA initiative to promote and advocate for renewed and intensified implementation of the Maputo Plan of Action for Reduction of Maternal Mortality in the Africa Region. One of its main foci is to mobilize political commitment and support of key stakeholders including national authorities and all communities for the reduction of maternal, newborn, and associated infant mortality in Africa. Since its regional launch in May 2009, a total of 31 African countries have launched CARMMA. In addition, in 2011, five countries have also launched their campaigns: Botswana, Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, and the United Republic of Tanzania.

In **Sierra Leone**, UNFPA partners with FBOs to undertake advocacy for Population and Reproductive health. The partner interfaith/cultural organizations include the National Islamic Network; the Faith Clinic of Jesus is Lord Ministries; the Christian Network on Population and Development and the Traditional and Religious Leaders Network. Over 200 Islamic scholar missionaries commonly known as “Tabliks “ were

trained to disseminate reproductive health and other issues in towns and villages, while Imams and other religious leaders regularly preach on current emerging issues as and when they arise.

In **Malawi**, UNFPA partnered with the Faith network-Ecumenical Counselling Centre on combating Gender based Violence (GBV), given that FBOs are critical agents for change dealing with large numbers of people in almost all areas of the country. Partnership strategies include: (i) capacity building to leaders of the religious community on GBV issues in order to come up with a pool of Champions on issues of GBV; (ii) advocacy on GBV and the church using the prominent clergy as advocates; (iii) outreach activities with communities on church teachings and GBV; and, (iv) training to clergy on marriage counselling and GBV. Based partly on the partnership the faith-based communities, UNFPA supported the development of a National plan against GBV, including radio debates by clergy on the Church and GBV - a good platform for sharing ideas and opinion around different church teaching and implication on GBV. This has led to increased awareness among the clergy from different faith communities on the role of the Church in GBV and gender issues.

ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Within the Asia-Pacific region, and with guidance from UNFPA's regional office (APRO), several countries in the region - Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Timor Leste and the Philippines - have been engaging in activities to address issues relating to women, peace and security, including bringing together people from different faiths and cultures.

In southern **Thailand**, APRO provided technical assistance to a regional organisation - **Asia Muslim Action Network** - to introduce concepts around Security Council Resolution 1325 at their regional assembly where civil society participants included those from other faiths, in recognition of the importance of bridging religious and cultural gaps. In collaboration with the *Asia Pacific Women Faith and Development Alliance*, APRO funded a study to explore and **map the extent to which faith organisations and leaders in the region are addressing violence against women and children, and how such violence is being**

addressed. A planned follow up initiative aims to strengthen the capacity of selected faith organisations and leaders to be advocates against violence against women and girls.

Literature reviews were conducted in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam, exploring **socio-cultural linkages with sexual and reproductive health among migrant women**, resulting in recommendations for governments and UNFPA, for culturally appropriate policy and service provision.

In **Sri Lanka**, UNFPA's engagement with FBOs is through advocacy and research around addressing gender-based violence. UNFPA supported the publication of a handbook titled "Gender-based Violence from Buddhist Perspectives" analysing the situation of gender-based violence in Sri Lanka, its adverse consequences on health and well-being of families and communities and how gender issues can be addressed through the Buddhist philosophy.

With UNFPA support, a research to identify gender discriminatory and exploitative practices and rituals in the Hindu ideology has been completed which aims to influence Hindu religious leaders, educationalists, activists, teachers and lawyers to address gender discriminatory practices and prejudices against women and girls. A research on "Furthering Islamic Social Justice and Gender Equality" is underway on issues such as polygamy, inheritance, women's rights, divorce, unequal witnessing laws and other injunctions discriminatory towards women. Furthermore, UNFPA supported women centres in six districts, which successfully enlisted religious community leaders against gender-based violence, using cultural and religious festivals as opportunities to spread positive messages on women's empowerment and gender-based violence.

EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

In the context of the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region, UNFPA took a leading role in the session devoted to the discussion of women's issues such as Gender-based Violence, Gender Equalities, legislative and normative basis for GBV, at the **World Forum for Intercultural Dialogue** on 7-9 April, 2011 in Baku. The aim of the "Baku process" was

to establish a platform in which today's challenges can be discussed in the spirit of intercultural dialogue and universal values. The forum provided a platform for the launch of new practical initiatives. The ratification of the GBV Law in the Parliament and the endorsement of the National GBV Strategy for Azerbaijan led the ground for the number of activities to be undertaken within the frameworks of joint initiatives in this direction between UNFPA and the government of Azerbaijan.

In **Armenia**, in partnership with civil society networks, and within the framework of 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence and the White Ribbon campaigns, UNFPA held special awareness raising activities involving the clergy from all the Dioceses of Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia and Javakhk on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and the Christian Value System in Armenian Families. The idea of men's participation in anti-GBV movement and the importance of the priest's work in promoting male involvement were particularly mainstreamed.

In **Tadjikistan**, UNFPA supported the establishment of a Religious Affairs Committee (RAC) in 2010 to focus on awareness raising of religious leaders on HIV, Reproductive Health, Sexually Transmitted Infections, gender issues as well as relevant legislation. Trainings were conducted for religious leaders from all provinces, and the engagement of female religious leaders is also envisioned. UNFPA pioneered a process of training of trainers on linking the religious (Islamic) precepts with ongoing health priorities – which is now being adopted by other international agencies as a good practice. Several programmes with the media and academia – including promoting the establishment of a specialised institute to offer state training for religious leaders on the above issues - is ongoing.

In **Georgia**, UNFPA continues to honour the Special Declaration of Commitment on the Promotion of Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights in the South Caucasus, which was signed in Tbilisi in 2006. This is being done through a variety of youth summer camps with opportunities to transform the cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity into valuable assets in hands of youth.

In partnership with the State Inter-Agency Council on Domestic Violence, UNFPA initiated a dialogue on Domestic Violence with more than 45 organisations, representing different ethnic and religious groups. The dialogue resulted in close cooperation and commitment to hold annual forums to continue the dialogue on population issues.

In cooperation with the Georgian Orthodox Church, UNFPA has launched an active humanitarian assistance program to provide response to Reproductive Health (RH) needs, to prevent and manage sexual gender based violence and respond to the needs of displaced population (IDPs) through provision of quality RH services and basic personal Dignity kits for families and youth. UNFPA collaborated with the Patriarchy of Georgia to provide assistance to IDPs residing in Collective Centres and New Settlements. Family dignity kits containing the most demanded items for males and females were distributed to more than 2,000 families covering 8,000 IDPs.

In **Turkey**, UNFPA continued its partnership with two ministries (Family and Women's Issues and Religious Affairs) which signed on to a protocol on training religious leaders, mainly imams, preachers, muezzins and trainees of Koranic learning courses, in dealing with cases involving violence directed at women. The first step was a training of trainers conducted in May 2010, with the participation of 40 religious leaders, after which nearly 4000 religious leaders working in the field, in Ankara, were reached. In 2011 the aim is to approach nearly 12,000 religious leaders working in the mid-Anatolya region.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, in close cooperation with FBOs, UNFPA conducted trainings on promoting sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, family planning and HIV/AIDS prevention along Islamic lines. Almost a year after the inter-ethnic conflict that devastated communities in the South of Kyrgyzstan, FBOs are one of the important partners with the potential to prevent and reduce the risk of GBV and provide support and care to GBV survivors and reconcile communities. FBOs have been involved in the implementation of the Flash Appeal project aimed at bringing communities together and successfully addressing gender based violence through different creative approaches which are respectful of the conservative contexts, such as community-based theatres.

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

At the Latin American and Caribbean regional levels, in addition to working in close consultation with a range of FBOs to develop a **Regional Strategy for Engagement with Faith Communities as Cultural Agents of Change**, strategic partnerships have been furthered by the UNFPA regional office (LACRO) with two key regional networks: Religions for Peace and the Latin American Council of Churches. Programmatic work is being supported around the prevention of gender based violence; supporting the Interfaith Committee on Prevention, Treatment and Care of HIV / AIDS; working against stigma and discrimination and promoting the MDGs - in particular MDG 5 aimed at reducing maternal mortality.

In **Guatemala**, strong emphasis is placed on the promotion and integration of an intercultural focus in all aspects of work. UNFPA Guatemala started to review the extent to which an intercultural approach was integrated in the projects, programs and strategies. As a first result, UNFPA Guatemala's strategies on youth and masculinity have been revised and now include an ethnic and intercultural focus.

The promotion and integration of an intercultural focus has been an external process with UNFPA's partners, whereby they have been encouraged to analyze both external and internal operating contexts through ethnicity and gender lenses. UNFPA staff participated in trainings and workshops to enhance knowledge and to reflect on the national and international policy framework regarding the rights of Indigenous people. This institutional strengthening process promoted dialogue amongst UNFPA staff on spirituality, intercultural approaches and the history and context of Indigenous people in Guatemala. In addition, UNFPA's program officers participated in outreach visits to and with Indigenous authorities, community leaders and midwives in order to gain a better understanding of the dynamics and relevant issues regarding Indigenous people in the country. In fact, UNFPA Guatemala is an active member of the Interagency Working Group on 'Interculturalidad' (UNDP, FAO, UN Women and UNFPA) which was initiated in April 2011.

Promoting and integrating an intercultural focus has been and still is a learning process for the UNFPA Country Office. An important lesson learned in this process is that spirituality, Indigenous people's rights and

intercultural dialogues are complex themes which require internally established processes. For many years, intercultural dialogues and the integration of an intercultural focus were not at the forefront of UNFPA's work in Guatemala. However, it is now regarded very important to reactivate these dialogues within the office as well as within the projects, programs and strategies. The demonstrated leadership and commitment of the country office management has been essential to the promotion and integration of an intercultural focus into the work of UNFPA in Guatemala.

Since 2010 UNFPA **Mexico** has been working with FBOs to build a joint forum for discussion, to find common areas of interest and to promote the intercultural dialogue around UNFPA's mandate. Issues of violence form an area of critical and common concern, which led to an agreement between UNFPA and FBOs that the prevention of human trafficking is an important area for collaborative work. To that end, UNFPA conducted two training sessions which assessed the national context, legal frameworks, information and data collation mechanisms, as well as rights-based models of intervention. As result of these trainings, the FBOs themselves are undertaking to organize a consultation on human trafficking in, which UNFPA will participate at different roundtable discussions.

UNFPA-Mexico is also working with Indigenous peoples to improve their access to sexual and reproductive health, to eradicate gender based violence and to prevent human trafficking. The Country Office has been working in four states (Oaxaca, Chiapas, Hidalgo and San Luis Potosí) with three different ethnicities (náhuatl, tének, tzeltal). As part of the cultural sensitivity, UNFPA-Mexico has been keen on including various stakeholders – such as community leaders, midwives, and intercultural universities - in its discussions, programme design and implementation.

In **Venezuela**, UNFPA established the “National Forum of FBOs in Partnership with UNFPA”. A roster of theologians from different religious traditions is now available, as well as a publication which identifies common priorities between FBOs and UNFPA. A common Training Manual for seminarians on sexual and reproductive health for the different religious traditions, and a directory of 25 Questions and Answers about issues of stigma and discrimination addressed from a theological

perspective, are currently being developed. Overall, the National Forum is proving to be one of the most successful models of partnership around the reproductive health and broader MDG agendas, and has already been replicated in Colombia and Mexico.

In **Honduras**, the partnership with FBOs has extended UNFPA's technical assistance in HIV prevention activities in line with human rights, stigma reduction and discrimination against persons living with HIV and their families. The experience has transcended the country level and some religious leaders have participated in regional and international meetings to share their experiences. Even though stigma and discrimination continue being an issue, the alliance with faith base organizations increases the acceptance of people living with HIV within their churches and also establishes an open dialogue among families and religious leaders.

In **Bolivia**, UNFPA has promoted an approach to sexual and reproductive health that fully incorporates inter-cultural dialogue as the basis for engagement of indigenous women organizations. Indigenous Women Leaders have been trained so as to, on the one hand, qualify their social oversight role and develop their own approach to it and, on the other hand, empower women, mostly rural and indigenous, to demand culturally-appropriate sexual and reproductive health services. This approach has included the setting up of inter-cultural Health Centres which provide sexual and reproductive health services tailored to local demand.

In **Guyana**, UNFPA has engaged the main FBOs representing the different religions – through their respective community worship places - and established Adolescent Youth Friendly Spaces to address issues of adolescent sexual and reproductive health and GBV. These initiatives provide the opportunity for adolescents, youth and their parents to commence dialogue on issues which were taboos in their families and dispel many of the myths. It also encouraged them to address issues of gender and gender inequalities promoted among boys and girls especially in the family.

The successes achieved led to a request from the Guyana Anglican Diocese in 2010 for support to the Anglican National Youth Council and the Brotherhood of St. Andrew (Men's Group) as the Diocese observes the

“The Year of the Family”. UNFPA’s support commenced in March 2011 with an Orientation Workshop for the Senior Clergy (including the Bishop of Guyana) and members of the Family Life Commission to discuss the importance of the Church as a partner in the development processes and the need to address issues of the MDGS and ICPD with an emphasis on sexual and reproductive health, gender, GBV and masculinities and creating and enabling environment for information and services to be integrated into the programmes of the Diocese.

The opportunities of this model-partnership with non-traditional partners provides a space for dialogue between UNFPA staff, FBO partners, and government agencies committed to tackling difficult and sensitive issues using a culturally sensitive human rights approach.

LESSONS LEARNED AND COMMITMENT TO WAYS FORWARD
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Key elements of UNFPA’s lessons learned of engaging with cultural agents of change, include the importance of the following:

1. Appreciating the *complex diversity of faith-inspired organization and mobilization*;
2. Acknowledging *linkages and relevance to Indigenous peoples’ affairs*;
3. Ensuring that *partnerships have to be inter/multi-faith and intercultural* in nature; and
4. Securing *management commitment* to active consideration and integration of the socio-cultural context of UNFPA’s mandate, which in turn, shapes gender relations and the realization of relevant human rights-based legislation, when and if it is already in place.

Consequently, UNFPA advocates for the importance:

1. Ensuring that *engagement with faith communities is part of UN system-wide coherence around partnerships with civil society*,

2. Ensuring that such engagement is *consistently focused on the human rights and other key pillar mandates* of the United Nations.
3. Urging for there to be *systematic follow-up, monitoring and evaluation of such partnerships*, along commonly agreed formats within the broader UN system.

ENDS.

