



Annex 4
**UNFPA engagement of faith-based and
religious actors, 2018**

Annual report of the Executive Director of UNFPA
2019 annual session of the Executive Board



I. Overview

Worldwide, over 80 per cent of the global population identifies with a religion. In recognition of religious faith as a powerful force for social and cultural change, UNFPA has been strengthening and expanding its sustained engagement with a range of faith-based actors: religious leaders, faith-based organizations, as well as religious institutions (including churches, mosques and inter-religious councils).

Since faith-based communities can have a positive influence on the hearts and minds of their constituents and help to reinforce or change behaviours, the continued engagement of UNFPA with faith-based actors at all (global, regional, national and local) levels reflects the organization's determination to secure transformative outcomes for girls and women's lives. Accordingly, through its continued advocacy with faith-based entities, UNFPA has helped to inspire change within their communities, often supporting change by helping to provide the resources needed to build capacity among governmental and religious leaders, and by supporting the messaging and advocacy tools needed by critical stakeholders.

II. Achievements at country level in 2018

In 2018, UNFPA continued to partner with traditional and religious communities in efforts to attain the goals of achieving universal access to sexual and reproductive health, realizing reproductive rights, and reducing maternal mortality to accelerate progress on the International Conference on Population and Development agenda.

In Niger, UNFPA has sought to strengthen the capacity of religious leaders on issues related to the control of population growth to capture the demographic dividend. Over 532 religious leaders from all eight regions of Niger were trained to conduct outreach sessions for social and behavioural change in order to promote the demographic transition. The commitment and active participation of community leaders, including traditional religious leaders, leaders of women's groups and associations, youth networks, and local elected representatives, are essential components for the success of any social mobilization for family planning in a traditional cultural context.

Honduras	Faith-based collaboration resulted in a jointly developed manual, <i>Adolescents with Purpose</i> , with information on adolescent pregnancy, its causes and consequences, and explanations of sexuality, as understood in religious texts and social practice.
UNFPA worked with an interreligious committee to prevent teenage pregnancies, and serves as a facilitator for related interventions by the different faith-based organizations. In Honduras this ecumenical committee is made up of the Evangelical Confraternity, the Adventist Church, the Episcopal Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Christian Reformed Church, and the Latin American Council of Churches. The collaboration during 2017-2018 resulted in a jointly developed manual, <i>Adolescents with Purpose</i> , which provides information on adolescent pregnancy, its causes and consequences, as well as explanations of sexuality as understood in religious texts and social practice. The manual advocates for the wisdom of postponement of sexual relations for adolescents, while also providing information on accessing youth and adolescent-friendly health centres to help prevent pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.	
Niger	In 2018, 23,963 women visited health centres as a result of the campaign on reproductive rights, implemented in partnership with female preachers.

<p>In 2018, UNFPA launched a campaign with female preachers to raise awareness of reproductive health and reproductive rights issues. The campaign targeted 50 schools in Maradi, one of the seven sub-national divisions of the country. Anecdotal evidence, observed by UNFPA staff and the preachers, suggests that the campaign has led to changes in women’s views and behaviour – in some cases right away. For instance, in 2018, 23,963 women visited health centres; and more women have shown interest in using contraceptives and in enrolling their daughters in school.</p>	
Belarus	<p>In order to support women and children to access social, psychological and pastoral counselling, a counselling cell and emergency accommodation was established together with the Belarussian Orthodox Church.</p>
<p>In Belarus, UNFPA works with the Belarussian Orthodox Church to increase awareness on domestic violence. The partnership has resulted in the establishment of a large national network of faith leaders capable of delivering messaging of non-violence in their communities. These faith leaders were all unified through the national referral mechanism for domestic violence. A counselling cell and emergency accommodation was also established, together with the Church, to support women and children to access social, psychological and pastoral counselling.</p>	
El Salvador	<p>Comprehensive sexuality education was operationalized with the support of faith-based partners.</p>
<p>In El Salvador, UNFPA promoted implementation of comprehensive sexuality education at the national level through advocacy with the Ministry of Education, faith-based organizations and civil society. This was mainly done through workshops and television programmes. UNFPA worked closely with the Latin American Consortium of Churches, including historical churches and Pentecostal churches.</p>	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	<p>The Inter-religious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina, representing Muslims, Orthodox Serbs, Catholics and Jews, issued a landmark declaration that condemned sexual violence as, “one of the most severe crimes committed in conflict”, and denounced the stigmatization of survivors.</p>
<p>In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for many of the uncounted survivors of sexual violence during the 1992-1995 war, the trauma they suffered is compounded to this day by the stigma they still face in their own families and communities. To tackle this, beginning in 2017, faith leaders took a strong stand against such social exclusion, marginalization and discrimination. The Inter-religious council in Bosnia and Herzegovina, representing Muslims, Orthodox Serbs, Catholics and Jews, issued a landmark declaration that condemned sexual violence as “one of the most severe crimes committed in conflict”. It further denounced the stigmatization of survivors, and called for “constructive cooperation ... in order to improve the status of survivors in Bosnia and Herzegovina today”. UNFPA also collaborates with faith-based organizations to provide direct counselling to survivors of sexual violence, their families and communities as a way to foster acceptance, non-discrimination and a sustainable reduction in stigmatization.</p>	

Georgia	Adoption of a statement by high-level Muslim faith leadership that strongly supported prevention and elimination of early, child and forced marriages and female genital mutilation.
<p>In Georgia, UNFPA works with Muslim faith leaders against early, child and forced marriages and female genital mutilation. An important achievement was the adoption of a statement by the high-level Muslim faith leadership that strongly supported prevention and elimination of early, child and forced marriages and female genital mutilation. Georgia, along with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Viet Nam, is part of the Global Programme to Prevent Son Preference and Gender-Biased Sex Selection, which works with various partners, including faith-based organizations.</p>	
Kyrgyzstan	UNFPA introduced the first secular subject in religious education and is currently finalizing the inclusion of health issues in the curriculum of religious schools.
<p>Given the increasingly important role that religious leaders play in Kyrgyzstan, UNFPA is collaborating with faith-based organizations, local authorities and health professionals to support health, family well-being and peace-building. UNFPA helps to build capacities of religious leaders and engages them in public dialogue and community counselling on issues related to reproductive health. UNFPA was also able to introduce the first secular subject in religious education and is currently finalizing the inclusion of health issues in the curriculum of religious schools.</p>	
Tajikistan	An important achievement was the proposal to the Religious Affairs Committee in Tajikistan to introduce a special faculty for continuous education of faith leaders.
<p>UNFPA works with the Religious Affairs Committee of Tajikistan, enabling both female and male Muslim faith leaders to communicate accurate information about HIV, and more broadly about sexual and reproductive health. Including sexual and reproductive health-related themes into Friday prayers, coupled with the broadcasting of radio and television programmes, has enabled messages on prevention of HIV and sexually transmitted infections to reach even the most conservative groups in Tajikistan. In 2018, the Religious Affairs Committee in Tajikistan introduced a special faculty for continuous education of faith leaders; the Government of Tajikistan is currently reviewing the proposal.</p>	

III. Support at global level

At the global level, UNFPA chaired the United Nations interagency task force on religion and sustainable development, and coordinated outreach with over 500 faith-based partners at national, regional and global levels.

UNFPA contributed to the establishment of a multi-faith advisory council to advise United Nations entities on efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The advisory council comprises the chief executive officers of 28 faith-based organizations.

In addition, UNFPA contributed to the following advocacy initiatives in 2018:

- (a) The interagency task force on religion and development, co-led by the United Nations Office for Genocide Prevention and UNFPA, together with the World Council of Churches, the ACT Alliance and the United Methodist Commission for

Justice and Peace, co-hosted the 4th Annual Symposium on Religion and International Affairs.

- (b) The United Nations interagency task force on religion and development, led by UNFPA, co-hosted, together with the Mission of Ireland to the United Nations and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, a side event at the High-Level Political Forum, on the role of faith-based organizations in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The discussions involved religious leaders as well as the CEOs of faith-based and faith-inspired developmental entities, and highlighted evidence of the value-added of partnering with faith communities on the Sustainable Development Goal themes under discussion.
- (c) The United Nations interagency task force on religion and development, together with the faith-based advisory council, launched the Kofi Annan Faith Briefings. These briefings convene the United Nations system's faith-based and faith-inspired partners annually to brief the United Nations system and Member States on progress on the 2030 Agenda, as well as key concerns and areas of work of religious actors linked to the United Nations mandates around human rights, peace and security and sustainable development.

IV. Challenges and lessons learned moving forward

Many UNFPA offices are expanding their reach to engage with faith-based actors more systematically, more strategically and in a more sustained manner. However, religious leaders often constitute the majority of advocacy and training recipients, and only a relatively smaller effort goes to engaging with faith-based organizations.

The work with faith-based actors remains largely separate – as stand-alone efforts. Also, it is rare to find religious actors being convened simultaneously with secular (non-faith based) non-governmental organizations and civil society. This means that UNFPA efforts risk being seen as favouring one civil society sector over another, thereby weakening a more sustained empowerment of a broader civic space and social discourse.

Even in countries where one particular religion is predominant, UNFPA needs to ensure the organization abides by the United Nations guidelines for engagement, which specifically iterate that all faith groups must be engaged by the UN office.

The human and financial resources spent on faith-based civil society engagement are hard to track across the organization. However, the tracking of such investments is necessary to enable UNFPA to assess the extent of need for this kind of work - and by implication to advance fund-raising strategies for such engagement. Further, the tracking of resources is also necessary for UNFPA in assessing the feasibility of keeping its promise to support those human rights defenders within faith-based communities who take certain risks to advocate for a socially and politically-sensitive mandate. Many of these faith-based human rights defenders expect support from UNFPA. At a minimum, therefore, an exit strategy has to be built into all programming outreach with these communities.