



OVERVIEW OF INTER-RELIGIOUS AND INTERCULTURAL ACTIVITIES: 2012-2013



“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

“5. The implementation of the recommendations contained in the Programme of Action and those contained in the present document is the sovereign right of each country, consistent with national laws and development priorities, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of its people, and in conformity with universally recognized international human rights.”¹

At the global UN system-wide level, UNFPA serves as a member of the UNESCO led Inter-Agency Task Force on Culture. UNFPA also continues to chair and convene the *United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force for Engaging Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) on Development*. Among other activities and initiatives, the Inter-Agency Task Force convenes policy consultations with academia, FBOs and UN entities around common developmental and humanitarian challenges. UNFPA is partnering with UNSSC, UNHCR and UNAIDS to provide Strategic Exchanges for UN middle and senior management around development, conflict and faith issues. UNFPA continues to be committed to systematic engagement with faith-inspired and other cultural agents of change – including partnering with members of its 500+ strong Global Interfaith Network for Population and Development.

Below is an overview of some of the intercultural and interreligious partnerships and initiatives, rolled out in 2013, presented per region².

AFRICA

Culturally sensitive approaches continue to be integrated into all UNFPA’s Africa-centered programmes at national and regional levels. UNFPA’s Dakar-based Regional Office developed a framework on working with faith-based organisations (FBOs). The Framework provides an overview of best practices around such engagements from different countries, and a range of strategies on how to effectively partner with FBOs on ICPD-related dynamics with a view to further building capacities, strengthening advocacy and messaging as well as faith-based health service delivery facilities, and institutionalizing knowledge of rights-based approaches particularly on gender equality, SRH and youth issues.

The UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (JP FGM/C) places particular emphasis on reaching out to religious and traditional leaders because of the tremendous influence they exert on the mores of the community. During Phase I of the JP FGM/C (2008-2013), as reflected in one of the outputs of the JP, the JP has supported the establishment of partnerships of religious leaders and other traditional groups opposed to FGM/C. In an effort to channel their opposition to the practice, the Joint Programme supported these networks in issuing “edicts”, defined as “public announcements, statements made by religious leaders during their preaching, awareness sessions, conferences, seminars, debates on television, or other media, or Fatwas”. Engagement with religious leaders was a

¹ *Key Actions for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development*: Adopted by the twenty-first special session of the General Assembly, New York, 30 June – 2 July 1999: pp2.

² Thanks to all UNFPA Country and Regional Offices for their contributions to the original call for contributions to the SG Report on Interreligious and Intercultural Activities, much of which has been used verbatim for this Report. The presentations of regions and countries is in alphabetical order.

prominent feature of the work in nearly all Joint Programme countries and is a strategy which continues to serve the Programme's objectives. A total of 4095 religious and traditional leaders made public declarations delinking FGM/C from religion. Furthermore, 730 edicts were issued in support of abandonment in eight of the Joint Programme's target countries in 2012.

BURKINA FASO:

UNFPA works to strengthen inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue around its sensitive mandate areas through collaboration with religious and customary leaders. This work is undertaken through a common framework of intervention in the fight against female genital mutilation (FGM), the promotion of family planning (FP), raising awareness and supporting efforts towards the elimination of violence against women (VAW/GBV) and the systematic promotion of maternal health services. The following is a sample of UNFPA's partnership, advocacy and technical assistance over the last year:

- A number of joint public statements by Customary Chiefs, Christian and Muslim religious leaders announcing the abandonment of excision in 25 villages;
- The National Coalition combating violence against women and girls has developed a unique Guidance for opinion-leaders, entitled «Lutte contre les violences faites aux femmes et aux filles, guide à l'intention des leaders d'opinions du Burkina Faso » (*Combating Violence against Women and Girls, Guidelines for the Customary Chiefs leaders of Burkina Faso*) in partnership with the Union of the Customary Chiefs and religious leaders of the country, and the Gender Common Fund.
- Technical and financial contributions to support the awareness raising and knowledge building efforts of civil society partners - on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women - on the «contribution of the customary and religious leaders to fight violence against women and girls in Burkina Faso »;
- With 70 Christian, Muslim and Customary Chiefs, the development of a well-researched and user-friendly document about the awareness of Family planning, for use and for dissemination in places of worship.

CHAD

The Chad country office is engaged in a policy dialogue since 2012 with three religious groups (Muslims, the Catholic Church and Evangelist groups) to build consensus on sensitive issues, such as family planning, early marriage and gender based violence. Very positive results have been achieved so far, as they reached a common agreement on shared objectives, public advocacy language, and specific opportunities for such these respective actors' engagement in several UNFPA-sponsored public events and capacity building of civil society and government services. A multi-stakeholders' platform is in place since May 2013 which will continue to mobilize cultural agents of change particularly around necessary for advocacy and sensitization of key populations.

COTE d'IVOIRE

UNFPA and the Ministry of Solidarity, Family, Women and Children are collaborating with the ARSIP (Alliance of religious leaders against HIV), a multi-faith organization, on various community outreach activities. The focus of the sensitization efforts revolves around GBV prevention and HIV. The very latest product of this collaboration is the elaboration of a Thematic Manual on Gender, Human Rights and Reproductive Health. This Manual compiles scientific evidence, medical explanations, advocacy language, recommendations for further action based on successful outreach approaches – all in a ‘religiously sensitive’ and accessible manner.

The United Nations has been organizing joint activities to promote inter-ethnic dialogue to build national reconciliation. These initiatives are particularly targeting the West of the country, where communities have been most affected by the crisis experienced and where social cohesion is at its weakest. UNFPA’s principal and signature approach is to apply women’s empowerment and male engagement strategies to promote collaboration among different ethnic groups, supporting in particular activities undertaken by multi-ethnic women’s groups. In June 2013, in Daloa, the United Nations organized an “[E]xchange and sensitization platform” between the United Nations, traditional and elected leaders and youth groups, to reinforce social cohesion and national reconciliation. UNFPA’s contribution focused on sensitization on gender equality and GBV as necessary paths towards genuine social cohesion and integration.

In January 2013, UNFPA also ensured a widespread engagement of non-faith-based and key civil society actors (including Foundation Djigui, MGF3, ASAPSU, ONEF...) with religious leaders, against FGM/C, on the occasion of the national sensitization campaign to end the practice.

GUINEA

In Guinea religious groups (Muslims and Christians) are campaigning to promote the abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation and Cutting under the leadership of the Ministry of Social Affairs with the support of UNFPA.

Intercommunity meetings are also organized to allow for changes in social norms. These meetings helped to make public declarations of abandonment of FGM/C, early and forced marriages in 92 culturally diverse communities in Guinea in 2013. These meetings help to strengthen inter-linkages between different populations and consolidate peace in these areas.

DRC

UNFPA works to strengthen the capacities of religious leaders to mobilize their followers in different thematic areas including family planning and HIV. As one of the means of doing this, UNFPA ensured the engagement of religious leaders as members of a national multi-sectorial Family Planning Coalition.

UNFPA supports health facilities managed by religious organizations. In a country like DRC where religious health facilities constitute a major part of the health system, working with religious institutions is vital to delivering the health services needed particularly by outlying

populations, particularly women, adolescents and children. Furthermore UNFPA supports several Ministry of Health sponsored Community Health Workers, to mobilize the population and raise awareness on reproductive health issues and strengthen male engagement in order to remove cultural barriers to accessing reproductive health services.

Cooperation for peace in the DRC, is under the leadership of United Nations Organizations Stabilization Mission (MONUSCO). Under the framework of the national “Comprehensive Strategy to Fight Sexually-based GBV in Conflict Related Settings”, UNFPA works with MONUSCO, UNCHR, UNICEF and NGOs, to support HIV prevention, assist SGBV survivors as well as prevent SGBV in the east of the country affected by armed conflict. Most specifically, UNFPA provides medical and psychological assistance to survivors of sexually-based GBV (SGBV) and works with NGOs – including FBOs - to prevent violence against women.

ETHIOPIA

Faith has a great value in the Ethiopian context. The majority of the Ethiopian population is a follower of one religious denomination or another. According to the last Population and Housing Census, it is only 3 percent of the population which belongs to traditional beliefs. Faith based Organizations (FBOs) have their own structures from the top up to the grass root levels. Commonly, religious leaders are considered as mediators between the laity and God. They are also in a position to teach and admonish their followers.

The Developmental Bible

The UNFPA Ethiopia Country Office started its engagement with faith-based organizations with *the Developmental Bible* it is co-sponsoring with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which is believed to have more than 40 million followers in the country. The Developmental Bible was a joint initiative between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, UNFPA and the Population Council, and revolves around integrating development issues into the daily teachings of the Church.

Maternal health, HIV prevention and the medical and social impact of harmful traditional practices such as early marriage and FGM are integrated in the daily teachings of the Church through this Developmental Bible. Since 2010, the Developmental Bible Manual has been printed and disseminated to 204 churches, nine theological colleges and clergy training centers in six regions.

More than 2,000 clergy undertook trainings on how to mainstream the Developmental Bible in their daily teachings. Currently the manual is being adapted in to the daily teachings of Sunday schools where the majority of the attendants are believed to be young people. A training and users’ guide is also under formulation to facilitate further and render more widespread, the use of the Developmental Bible.



Initiating Dialogue among faith-based organizations on youth sexual reproductive health, maternal health and harmful traditional practices

Building on the experiences from the implementation of the Developmental Bible, UNFPA created the forum for interfaith dialogues on peace, maternal health, youth sexual reproductive health and harmful traditional practices in collaboration with Norwegian Church AID and the Inter-religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE). The Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia is led by the highest echelons of 6 religious denominations that are well recognized by Ethiopians.

Select UNFPA-Ethiopia Achievements in inter-religious and inter-cultural engagement around SRH, HIV/AIDS GBV and FGM

- Two national and eight regional dialogue fora where 1680 clergy, Pastors, Imams from 6 religious denominations participated, have been conducted since mid-2012. The dialogue fora nurtured strong cooperation and sharing of best practices on peace-building, maternal and child health, HTPs, AYRH and HIV/AIDS. The first national dialogue forum which was conducted in 2011 issued a joint declaration which has been monitored in subsequent national and regional dialogue forums in the following two years. The deliberations have been documented in the form of proceedings, bulletins, reports, press releases and DVDs. Moreover, the deliberations of the dialogue forums were covered by print and electronic media.



From left to right: Pastor Zerihun Degu (IRCE General Secretary), Mr. Svein Arne Lende (NCA Ethiopia Country Representative), Mr. Eugene Owusu, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, his Grace Abune Gebriel, (Archbishop (Dr.) of Gedeo, Burj, Sidama Diocese and Chair of the IRCE), Rev. Dr. Wakseyoum Idosa, (President of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus), His Grace Abune Nathnael, (Acting Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church, Arch Bishop of Arsi Diocese), Mrs. Fantaye Gezahegn, (Director of Religious Organizations and Associations Registration Directorate with the Ministry of Federal Affairs), Archbishop Berhaneyesus Souraphel, (Metropolitan Archbishop of Addis Ababa, President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Ethiopia), Rev. Alemu Shetta, (General Secretary the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia) deliberating during the second dialogue forum with religious leaders on Peace, Maternal and Youth Reproductive Health.

Lessons learned

- Integrating the social change aspects of ICPD-issues such as maternal health and HIV prevention in the already existing services and further technical assistance will related processes/engagements more cost effective and more accessible;
- If FBOs and religious leaders are well capacitated and receive consistent support, they can bring major social behavioral and political impact and create an enabling environment for social change. They have the highest potential to reach far and deep, to the grassroots levels to deliver messages to change the lives of average people in general, and marginalized and vulnerable individuals and groups in particular;
- Better coordination and harmonization among the various FBO partners was observed if their theological differences are well recognized and accepted;
- The leaders of the six member organizations of the IRCE recognized the need to have strengthened efforts on maternal and youth reproductive health matters. The fora also served as platforms for sharing good practices;
- There remains a need to deliberately target the strengthening of FBOs and development wings of religious health service delivery facilities, in order to further

integrate women, adolescent and youth health issues in their spiritual teachings, as well as in the various dialogues, faith-inspired discussions in their respective fora and centers.

Ways forward

- Evidence and research is needed to draw lessons from the existing social mobilization tools and from ongoing engagements among individual religious groups. More documentation is also needed to emphasize the functionality and strategic use of existing structures of FBOS like Sunday schools, youth and women ministries, clergy and theological institutions.
- Consistent follow-up and capacity building is needed to strengthen interfaith commitments and congregation based interventions through individual FBOs for better outcomes.
- Strengthening networks and creating linkage with other national and international level FBO networks is essential. This is mainly to draw lessons and to further build the capacity of Inter-faith councils as coordinating forums.

NIGER

In 2012, the First UNFPA Forum with Traditional Chiefs, took place with 90 chiefs signing on to the Declaration of Niamey, committing themselves to sensitize their populations on Family Planning, Maternal Mortality, assisted deliveries, and child marriage. On Tuesday December 10th, UNFPA hosted a Forum with the Association of Niger's Traditional Chiefs (ACTN), this time with 130 Traditional Chiefs, who made a resolution reiterating their commitment to working with UNFPA to:

- 1) fight against maternal mortality
- 2) fight against child marriage
- 3) fight against high demographic growth.

In addition, they went further by asking Government and Parliamentarians to take action on these issues. Their recommendations to Niger's decision-makers, including the President, the Parliament and the Government, are to:

- fill the legal void to regulate child marriage and other gender-based violence
- increase the numbers of rural justice outings to increase civil registry of citizens
- create additional health and education infrastructures in sufficient quantity and of quality to satisfy the needs of Niger's population.

Moreover, the Traditional Leaders requested UNFPA to re-enforce their capacity in Results-based Management, on UNFPA financial and management procedures and on maternal death audits.

The following day, two Chiefs from each of Niger's regions worked with UNFPA technical staff to develop their 2014 action plan.

SIERRA LEONE

UNFPA partnered with Senior Christian and Muslim leaders and supported them further in their efforts to establish an inter-religious organization promoting reproductive health, including Family Planning also including Condom use. They refer to the Bible and the Quran to demonstrate that both Christianity and the Muslim faith do not reject Family Planning or the use of condoms. This inter-religious group has developed into a unique platform of Champions advocating for reproductive health across the nation.

In collaboration with MSWGCA and MOHS, UNFPA entered into partnership with an organization targeting male engagement, *Fambul Initiative Network for Gender Equality Sierra Leone* (FINE - SL), to international accolade, in 2012. *Men Engaging Men* dialogues, have been held in 15 Chiefdoms of the Bo District to raise awareness of Traditional Paramount Chiefs, Section Chiefs and tribal heads) and Religious Leaders (Imams and Pastors) about their role in the reduction of teenage pregnancy and the elimination of FGM/C of women and girls in their communities.

The Male Peer Educators Networks (MAPENs) set up by FINE-SL in these communities, are in dialogue with the Traditional and Religious Leaders (TRLs) and some of the TRLs form active part of MAPENs in promoting male engagement in the reduction of maternal death and prevention of GBV, as well as various gender equality efforts. FINE-SL recently received a global award for their work at the last World Health Assembly.

UNFPA Sierra Leone in partnership with the Office of the First Lady (OFL) of Sierra Leone, has been engaged in high level advocacy among Traditional and Religious Leaders(TRLs) nationwide on the reduction of maternal mortality, teenage pregnancy, Family Planning and child marriage as part of the implementation of (Campaign for Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa (CARMMA). In championing the CARMMA, the First Lady of Sierra Leone held focused dialogues with Traditional and Religious leaders in all the districts of Sierra Leone.

The Office of the First Lady hosted a high level delegation from the sub region in May 2013, with Her Excellency the First Lady of the Federal Republic of Nigeria participating at the National Conference of Traditional and Religious leaders (TRLs). The different countries shared experiences with TRLs in Sierra Leone on their roles and responsibilities in the reduction of maternal mortality, teenage pregnancy child marriage and FGM/C. Both the Traditional and religious leaders committed to continued work within their diverse communities, to reduce harmful practices.

UNFPA Sierra Leone's involvement with religious and cultural leaders continues to affirm its own advocacy efforts around the mandate. A key lesson learned is that the involvement of customary and religious leaders in the determination and implementation of development programmes is a very strong way to ensure ongoing inter-cultural dialogue within the nation's own borders, and serves as a genuine and organic means towards the promotion of social cohesion and co-existence.

ARAB STATES

EGYPT

UNICEF-UNFPA's Joint Programme on FGM was a key feature of religious engagement in activities involving religious leaders. These initiatives included 4 workshops that were conducted for 86 religious leaders, on "Child rights in Islam and FGM". 28 of these leaders were based in 3 districts and committed to taking part to endorse future planned advocacy activities. In total, 180 religious leaders will be trained by the end of December 2013. A revised Information Booklet on Islam, Child Rights and FGM will be distributed through such workshops to the champion religious leaders.

MOROCCO

A program with the *Rabita Mohamedia des Oulamas*, a Moroccan FBO started in June 2012, continues with the overall objective to improve youth access to information on SRH. To fight GBV, promote SRH, the culture of equality and human rights, UNFPA considers the involvement of men as fundamental to enabling change and ensuring sustainability of all actions. To that end, UNFPA is implementing a strategic vision based on the involvement of FBOs and religious authorities on sensitive issues such as adolescent & youth SRH, fighting GBV and promoting gender equality. The partnership with the *Rabita* focuses on continued training of religious leaders in all regions of Morocco (men and women) to become agent of change in their communities, especially vis-à-vis their youth.

Two major types of activities are implemented as part of advocacy (including communication), as well as technical assistance and trainings. Under Communication and advocacy the target is to strengthen the skills of the FBO's own peer educators in audiovisual techniques and organizing programs with local radio and TV channels (religious programs) for the animation of discussions involving men and boys in SRH, human rights, gender equality and the fight on GBV.

As for the trainings, UNFPA Morocco and the *Rabita* use the toolkit on "integrating sexual and reproductive health, human rights, gender equality, HIV/AIDS and the fight against GBV to target adolescents and youth from traditional schools, youth in prisons, and adolescents in child protection centers. Modules related to SRH, human rights and fight against GBV are also being introduced in the Training Institute of Imams and *Morshidat* (female religious leaders) in Rabat.

OPT

In the *Occupied Palestinian Territories* UNFPA works with religious leaders on GBV and the prevention of violence, provision of support and care, and countering, through their diverse platforms, societal or religious norms and practices perpetuating such violence. In 2013, in disadvantaged communities of West Bank and Gaza, community and religious leaders were trained on GBV, and on other harmful practices and effects on communities, and on aspects of sexual and reproductive health as well as rights. A new internal UNFPA

strategy is will be developed by December 2013 to engage men – including religious ones - in all their roles and functions for the promotion of gender equality and women’s sexual and reproductive rights and women’s health.

SUDAN

UNFPA Sudan CO investigates the impact of Islamization on customary law through the Traditional Mediation Courts in some rural areas, especially in Gedarif in East Sudan. Customary law has historically had great impact on Sudanese women’s rights particularly with regard to issues of marriage, divorce, custody and maintenance.

The Traditional Mediation Courts have relied on plural legal sources, including customary law, common law and Islamic law. The findings of research there suggest that under Islamist rule, these Courts were connected to the state system as a means to control communities, with implications on sustaining gender inequalities. The tribal authorities have thus been marginalized. The formalization of the courts has affected its role in defusing conflict and protect women. Instead of being a court dynamic enough to adapt to changing local needs, the courts have become static; their main aim has been to hinder family disintegration something which is a reflection of the state’s Islamic project emphasizing Muslim families as the foundation of the nation.

At the same time, gender relations have changed in the area, partly because of new possibilities within education and partly because of activism to raise awareness about International Conventions to which Sudan is signatory to, as per UNFPA’s empowerment projects.

With this backdrop, UNFPA, based on two ethnographic fieldwork studies in Doka in 2011 and 2012, argues that there is a discrepancy between the Courts’ decisions and women’s expectations and understanding of the Courts’ roles. Women have started to reject the Courts’ verdicts. Despite the Courts’ insistence on family integration even in cases of domestic violence and hardships within marriage, women decide to separate from their spouses even when the Courts’ refusal to grant them a divorce.

In addressing these changing gender relations, amidst the discrepancies between Islamic teachings and the practices of these Courts, UNFPA is collaborating with the religious and traditional leaders at the local administrative level, and official authorities. This effort of the harmonization of the customary practices with the formal legal system is receiving global attention as it is needed to grant women access to their health and rights - including their reproductive rights.



Sudan holds First Sufi Forum on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting

“We count on Sufi Sects to raise awareness about modern time issues, especially women’s issues,” Ghazi Elsayed Abdel Rahim, Minister of Guidance and Endowment.

With UNFPA support, the Federal Ministry of Guidance and Endowment organized the First Sufi Forum in 2013 on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting focusing on “Keeping the Girl *Saleema* (intact)” - which is a principle entrenched in Islamic teachings. Held at the premise of one of the prominent Sufi Sects in Omdurman, Khartoum; the Forum was attended by the Minister of Guidance and Endowment, more than ten Sufi Sects leaders, local government officials, Islamic scholars, the media in addition to hundreds of spectators.

Sufis Sects represent mainstream Islam in Sudan with millions of followers across the country. Leaders of Sufis Sects enjoy special status in Sudanese society and play a central role in the teaching and practice of moderate Islam. There are hundreds of Sufi Sects and sub-sects in the country, with considerable impact on community members ranging from preschool education (*khalwa*) to weekly Friday Sermon by Imams (religious leaders) where Islamic teachings are enforced to weddings contracts and blessings.

The Secretary of the Ministry of Guidance and Endowment, Elfatih Mukhtar Mohamed, underscored the Ministry’s determination to get into a strategic partnership with UNFPA to correct misconceptions to combat harmful practices such as FGM that degrade women. The

Secretary noted his Ministry's commitment that "through this partnership, we will do our utmost best to combat Female Genital Mutilation that harms women physically, psychologically and socially."

Sufi Sects leaders also addressed the event affirming their commitment to women issues in order to create healthy and balanced generations.

Sheikh Majdi Salah Eddin Elahmadi, leader of one of the prominent Sects, Al Ahmadiya, said that they are planning on holding workshops to train Imams and preachers in villages and rural areas on raising awareness about FGM. "FGM is degrading to women, has no ground in Islam and negates the United Nations charters on human and women rights," he added.

Among other projects and activities at the policy and community levels, the First Sufi Forum comes as a continuation of UNFPA diligent work on raising awareness about the harmful practice of FGM/C and delinking it from Islam. UNFPA considers religious and community leaders as instrumental in the abandonment of FGM/Cutting in Sudan.

ASIA-PACIFIC

Adopting intercultural and interfaith approaches to their work, UNFPA in the **Asia Pacific** region has promoted life-changing and life-saving interventions within a range of communities that are diverse in culture, language and faith. A seminal mapping – the first of its kind in the region – was undertaken in partnership between the Asia-Pacific Regional Offices of both UNFPA as well as World Vision. The 'mapping' identified and showcased the range of FBOs working to combat VAW across the region. The emerging report together with the unique faith-based developmental approach of World Vision, were shared at the UN Commission on the Status of Women in March 2013.

Taking this partnership work further, UNFPA's Pacific SRO is also supporting World Vision to implement the Channels of Hope in a humanitarian setting, by establishing safe spaces for women to meet and discuss coping strategies and gather information to support community recovery.

AFGHANISTAN

In UNFPA-*Afghanistan*, due to the realization that misperceptions regarding family planning among religious leaders continue to constitute challenges to the promotion of family planning as a means to reduce maternal mortality, a close collaboration was forged with the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs (MoHRA), as a means of to strengthening and building new strategic alliances and partnerships to move the family planning agenda forward, and to improve access and utilization to birth spacing/family planning. To that end, several consultations on these sets of issues were planned throughout 2013, with a view to building learned understanding of the challenges and seeking appropriate jurisprudence to clarify relevant religious positions.

One such consultation was international in scope with the participation of religious scholars from Muslim-majority countries. The other was a national level conference which was

attended by local religious scholars. Both of these built on a regional consultation which had been hosted in Kabul in Feb 2012. The resource persons included authoritative religious leaders from Pakistan, Iran, the Philippines (state of Mindanao), Indonesia, Malaysia, and India. Among their deliberations were shared experiences of their respective attempts to seek to correct misperceptions and misrepresentation about the position of Islam. Their *Fatwas* (religious decrees) were then shared with Afghan religious leaders and officials from the MoHRA. The rich discussions at the end of these consultations also led to a declaration supporting family planning and birth spacing. Plans have been drawn up for similar discussions to take place in five regions of Afghanistan involving more religious community leaders.

UNFPA is sending 8 popular and influential religious leaders to Egypt's Al-Azhar University (Sunni Islam's major learning center) to attend workshops on Islam and family planning. This is being undertaken with a view to enabling these religious leaders to be advocates in Afghanistan, and to impart their knowledge throughout the country during especially designated opportunities, to other religious leaders.

Also as part of its diverse efforts to inform and advocate for family planning, UNFPA-Afghanistan office developed a short video animation clip wherein the central character - a religious leader - provides advice on family planning to the male head of the family. This is an important means of culturally-sensitive advocacy, which is targeting a male-dominated society to ensure male-involvement.

Moreover, UNFPA is committed to continuing to support the Ministries in their collaboration with religious community leaders, to advocate against harmful practices such as early marriage. Partnering with faith-based organizations is a means of engaging with the social and cultural context in which decisions are made which impact on the lives of Afghan girls and women, and are linked to their ability to claim and enjoy their rights.

EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

GEORGIA

Within the framework of the UN Joint Programme to Enhance Gender Equality, UNFPA-*Georgia* supports a number of innovative activities to foster issue-based strategic partnership with the faith-based organizations. An extensive collaboration with the Theological Academy at the Patriarchate of Georgia is building towards a national consultation for youth and faculty members of the Academy. Participants are being asked to research and prepare papers on critical and sensitive social issues, such as gender equality, GBV prevention, healthy life-style, and reproductive health and rights. The objectives of the discussions will be to bridge the awareness gap and stimulate interest among the students of theological Academy as part of the youth-specific input into the nation's sustainable development agenda.

Since the majority of Georgia's population practices Orthodox Christianity, UNFPA Georgia continues its cooperation with the Radio Station "Iveria" at the Patriarchy of Georgia. Within the scope of the cooperation, 16 (sixteen) radio programs are being prepared and transmitted

to the attention of wider spectrum of the society. Radio programs stimulate the interest of the listeners and make them think about the essence and importance of gender equality, SRH&R, gender-based violence, maternity and pregnancy, family and generation, etc. Radio programs is an excellent opportunity to introduce synergy of religious views, evidence-based population data and expert opinions in the radio programs.

UNFPA/Georgia will further expand the scope of cooperation with the faith-based organizations by reaching out to the representatives of the different confessions in the country. In support to the above-mentioned, an Inter-faith roundtable will be arranged in November/December 2013 in order to facilitate dialogue among representatives of different confessions on gender equality, domestic violence, maternal and youth health.

UNFPA/Georgia is arranging various youth advocacy events crucial for the sustainable development of Georgian youth, such as Peer Education Campaign, Youth Festivals, Youth National Forums, Youth competitions, etc. UNFPA/Georgia encourages and ensures the inclusion of the ethnic minorities in all the above-mentioned activities, thus fostering their full integration in the society.

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

UNFPA's Latin American and Caribbean Regional Office hosted a continent-wide Consultation on "Churches and Rights and Sexual and Reproductive Health". The Consultation was co-hosted by the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI). Founded in 1982, CLAI is an ecumenical network representing over 180 Anglican, Episcopal, Baptist, Congregational, Evangelical, Lutheran, Moravian, Mennonite, Methodist, Nazarene, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Reformed and Waldensian Churches in 20 countries throughout Latin America.

The event was attended by over 250 participants, among them CLAI members and partner Churches which sponsored both the event and special guests. The event was timed to take place alongside the VI General Assembly of CLAI, which is attended by CLAI's various member Churches together with religious leaders, President and Secretary General, the Board of Directors, the Presidents of the five sub-regions and the Coordinators of the pastorals branches of the organization, dealing with youth, women, afro-descendants and indigenous people, among others.

This continent-wide Consultation is a culmination of a process of twenty national and four sub-regional consultations on "Churches and Rights and Sexual and Reproductive Health", which were held throughout 2012. During this process each country involved in the consultation was provided with a special opportunity for national reflection, analysis and dialogues based on Biblical – theological - cum public health and anthropological perspectives, on rights and sexual and reproductive health as contained in the Cairo Agenda.

A historic document, referred to as the "Consensus of Havana" was one of the outcomes of the continent-wide consultation. The Consensus (see Annex II), expressed CLAI's commitment to the ICPD Programme of Action in the lead up to the latter's 20th Anniversary. The Consensus is expected to provide important inputs into the negotiations and discussions

taking place during the First Regional Conference on Population and Development taking place in August 2013, in Montevideo, Uruguay.

GUYANA

UNFPA-Guyana convened a Faith Leaders Forum on the International Conference on Population and Development, with Christians (including the Bishop of the Catholic Church), Hindus, Muslims, Bahai's and Rastafarians. Their meeting was described by one of the faith leaders themselves as "very powerful". Another Leader sent this message to the UNFPA organizers:

The historic meeting resulted in the creation of an Interfaith Platform. Moreover, a Declaration containing the voices of Guyana's faith leaders (see Annex) indicated that as faith leaders, they were urging "that every effort be made to ensure that all Guyanese have access to Sexual and Reproductive Health services, and that they are protected from gender-based violence, diseases, and other threats to life." Further, they recognized "that women and men are endowed with abilities to make choices regarding their lives, including their sexual and reproductive rights... [and that] Governments, religious institutions, and civil society need to guarantee these rights by providing women, men, and youth with the information, knowledge, and skills necessary to protect them and enable them to make wise and conscientious choices... [while]...as leaders of Faith-Based Organizations, [they] commit to working in partnership with Government and Civil Society to advance the rights of all Guyanese, giving particular attention to the poor and vulnerable populations".

CONSIDERATIONS FOR 2013 – ON PARTNERSHIPS AND CULTURALLY FLUENT PROGRAMMING FOR THE ICPD

“There remains a need to deliberately target the strengthening of FBOs and development wings of religious health service delivery facilities, in order to further integrate women, adolescent and youth health issues in their spiritual teachings, as well as in the various dialogues, faith-inspired discussions in their respective fora and centers”

UNFPA Ethiopia Country Office

“We consider that in the face of mounting challenges such as population growth, urbanization, environmental degradation, disasters, climate change, increasing inequalities and persisting poverty, there is an urgent need for new approaches, ...[which] ... should fully acknowledge the role of culture as a system of values and a resource and framework to build truly sustainable development, the need to draw from the experiences of past generations, and the recognition of culture as part of the global and local commons as well as a wellspring for creativity and renewal.”

UNESCO– “The Hangzhou Declaration: Placing Culture at the Heart of Sustainable Development Policies”³

UNFPA engages in a wealth of activities – albeit diverse in range and nature - and best practices at the country level on engaging with cultural issues as well as actively partnering with faith-based organizations. This confirms findings of an earlier mapping which UNFPA undertook from 2005-2007 which confirmed that at least 90% of all Country Offices are partnering with religious leaders and faith-based organizations on a range of issues, particularly around the SRH and youth-specific agendas. It was also as a result of this mapping exercise which built on earlier research conducted since 2001, that UNFPA was able to identify religion as a key element of culture, and religious actors as one of the many ‘cultural agents of change’. Other cultural agents of change identified included media, youth, parliamentarians and women’s rights and human rights actors and organizations, each of which is being dealt with by various HQ divisions.

Headquarters’ Perceptions Differ from Regions & Countries

There is a gap between UNFPA Headquarters and UNFPA offices in the regions and countries, however, in terms of engagement with FBOs in particular. HQ appears reticent and diffident in acknowledging its own track record in encouraging a UN-system wide assessment of such partnerships through and with its leadership of the relevant inter-agency mechanism, this is particularly awkward at a time when other UN agencies are now overcoming their own skepticism and indeed acknowledging the value of their own such engagements in a more systematic manner.

Keeping Track

Keeping track of such engagements at an institution-wide level remains a challenge, as COARs do not usually provide room for such overviews -- in the same way that broader

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<http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/images/FinalHangzhouDeclaration20130517.pdf>

engagement with civil society around SRH and Population issues is also poorly noted therein. A recommendation for COARs should be to ensure that there is some form of systematic reporting on civil society partnerships, within which FBOs should be included as one of the key sectors.

Acknowledging Continuum of Communities and Civil Society

A clear acknowledgement of the fact that in many countries, several 'community based health workers' and 'community-based organizations' are themselves faith-based and/or faith-inspired, would add to the realism of engagement. We would advise against the tendency to focus on services delivered (supply-side) of Family Planning for instance, as opposed to the modus operandi (demand-side) and the relative bias in favor of only secular non-governmental organizations.

In fact, engagement with civil society organizations in UNFPA is dispersed over several divisions in HQ itself, and requires a more systematic reflection and strategic 'deployment' of such partnerships. To that end, a review of such engagement (which should include FBOs, but also youth organizations, women's rights and human rights' organizations, as well as other non-state partners such as midwifery organizations, academic and policy think tanks, etc.) is pertinent as UNFPA considers its overall strategic frameworks - and strategic partnerships - for its new 2014-2017 Strategic Plan.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) - many of which are themselves cultural agents of change - are critical partners and co-owners of the ICPD and global development agendas, and their agency in generating demand for services, advocacy, as well as accountability, remains underestimated. Similarly, their role as part of the equation of social determinants of health, remains under-valued, particularly in HQ/New York.

While UNFPA has an impressive track record in a myriad of partnerships with diverse CSOs - not least of which in fragile state contexts - there remains a dire need for reflection on lessons learned and successful engagement strategies which can be replicated or taken to scale. The opportunity for undertaking the latter, in a studied manner, with insights from CSO partners themselves (including FBOs), should be deliberately sought, and be undertaken by TD as a whole, in conjunction with other key divisions in UNFPA HQ as well as ROs and COs.

Clusters, Strategic Plans and Theories of Change

Cultural agents of change are not only a feature of sensitive women's reproductive health and youth SRH dynamics, but they are also **critical enablers of population and development dynamics**, not least of which incorporate urbanization and migration-related issues. As an example, de facto "youth centers", and certainly many of the spaces for youth convenings, take place in urban slum areas under the aegis of an FBO.

The opportunity provided by clustered work plans and integrated field support efforts, includes a deliberate eye for CSO engagement **as part of the social-cultural determinants of health and inclusive social development**. This may be, in part, evidenced particularly in the new Strategic Plan 2014-2017's Outcome 3 which has a specific set of Outputs related to CSO engagement. While this is a critical and commendable mechanism of commitment and accountability on paper, there remains a need to ensure that FBOs are:

1. Systematically part and parcel of the broader CSO engagement on youth and women's reproductive health – not an afterthought or symbolic/nominal engagement;
2. The engagement with them is systematically integrated in ICPD-review related analysis, reviews and processes of consultations;
3. That the accountability for such partnerships is Fund-wide; and
4. That these partnerships are duly resourced – with time, energy and finances.

Supporting UN Inter-Agency Collaboration

UNFPA remains the Chair of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging with FBOs for Development. In that capacity it continues to serve not just UNFPA, but all the UN members of the Task Force (approximately 6 specialized agencies and two UN Secretariat Divisions) in different ways. Some of the clearest outcomes of this service include the continued demand for UNFPA presence and advice at different developmental fora, in diverse SG Reports and UN convening opportunities, but also by FBOs themselves interested in reaching out to the UN system. To date, much of this engagement has tended to be seen – when it is at all noted - as the purview of an individual in UNFPA-HQ. It may be wise to consider supporting these efforts as per above advocacy.

Remaining Needs

1. Recognition and messaging: from the highest levels of UNFPA management which endorse – at least in messaging – the importance of cultural sensitivity and cultural fluency, as an asset to human rights based approaches to UNFPA's mandate;
2. Updating and resourcing institutional tools and documentation and capacities: Some of the tools developed to support UNFPA Staff in applying culturally sensitive programming – particularly the Culture Lens – requires updating, and this requires resources. Beyond the tools, however, a number of critical studies to document the social-cultural impact and sustainability of SRH and youth interventions are also required. To that end and given the dwindling resources:
 - ✚ DHR's LCMB could be called upon to ensure that the UNSSC co-sponsored training is integrated into its own financed resources for UNFPA staff
 - ✚ IERD's RMB could be called upon to support some specific fund-raising with these needs in mind.
3. Endorsing cultural dynamics at the global and regional levels: There are currently several global initiatives on culture and development being undertaken and planned for the post-2015 MDG and SDG processes. UNFPA's involvement – at the very least presence – requires support.
4. Supporting Cohesion within HQ: Cultural work in UNFPA need not be sidelined nor subsumed as only one individual's mandate in one unit of a Division. Instead, cultural fluency should be seen as it is increasingly so in development and political circles, i.e. as part and parcel of political sensitivity and policy development for the entire Fund. As such, it would be helpful if there is closer proximity, and/or reporting, to the executive structures of UNFPA, on a more regular basis, as part of the overall reporting on the Clusters and Strategic Plan roll-out.

ENDS.

ANNEX I: Statement from the Guyana Faith-based Forum on the International Conference on Population Development (ICPD)

Preamble

We are leaders of Faith-Based Institutions representing Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Baha'i, and Rastafarian communities, gathered by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) on July 19, 2013 at the Georgetown Club in preparation for ICPD beyond 2014.

We are mindful of the important role that religion plays in the Guyanese society and welcome this opportunity to engage with the ICPD process and to discern our common calling to ensure that the rights and dignity of the people of Guyana are upheld.

We share core beliefs that human beings are divinely created with bodies, minds, and souls and called to live with responsibility and accountability. We affirm our commitment to fundamental human rights as critical to building a good and wholesome society.

We urge that every effort be made to ensure that all Guyanese have access to Sexual and Reproductive Health services, and that they are protected from gender-based violence, diseases, and other threats to life.

We recognize that women and men are endowed with abilities to make choices regarding their lives, including their sexual and reproductive rights. Governments, religious institutions, and civil society need to guarantee these rights by providing women, men, and youth with the information, knowledge, and skills necessary to protect them and enable them to make wise and conscientious choices.

As leaders of Faith-Based Organizations, we commit to working in partnership with Government and Civil Society to advance the rights of all Guyanese, giving particular attention to the poor and vulnerable populations.

We further commit to undertake the establishment of a **Peace with Justice Platform** aimed at ensuring that all Guyanese have equal opportunities to live lives of dignity and freedom from hunger, disease, violence and other threats to life.

Additionally, in keeping with the advancement of technology, our aim is to create a **Website** to accompany the Peace with Justice Platform, which will facilitate easy access to information and building of an **Inter-Faith Network**.

ANNEX II – Consensus of Havana

6th GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE LATIN AMERICAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (CLAI)

"Affirming an ecumenism of concrete gestures"

CONTINENTAL CONSULTATION ON "THE CHURCHES AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS"

We, representatives of churches and ecumenical bodies, full, fraternal and associate members who make up the Latin American Council of Churches, and special guests, cooperating institutions, Theological Education Centres and other ecumenical bodies, participated in the Continental Consultation "The Churches and Sexual and Reproductive Rights," in the City of Havana (Cuba), on 21-22 May 2013, on the occasion of the 6th General Assembly of CLAI:

- We represent the diversity of our continent, which includes men and women, youth, indigenous people Afro-descendants, and others who belong to different sectors of the population and are part of civil-society organizations in the countries of our region;
- We have, within the context of committed faith, a role to play as agents of change at the community, national, regional and global level, safeguarding the dignity and human rights of all people; with our actions, we seek to have an impact on improving their quality life.
- We promoted in 2012 twenty national consultations and four sub-regional consultations with the participation of leaders of various church bodies and civil- society organizations, of the respective countries and the United Nations. The consultations provided a very special opportunity for reflection and analysis from a biblical-theological, public-health and anthropological perspective, on sexual and reproductive rights, as contained in the Cairo Agenda, as well as on issues relative to discrimination and racism, poverty, education, social movements and environmental protection.
- We believe that this process has involved intense discussions and debates that were reflected in a series of concrete statements, challenges and action proposals conducive to promoting the full exercise of human rights and a culture of peace and justice. We also believe that we are at it walking fully in line with the Divine Will that seeks a dignified and abundant life for all his children. In fact, every human being is made in the image, after the likeness of God (Gen 1:26) and is called to live a full, dignified and generous life; this is especially the case of populations experiencing vulnerability and exclusion.
- We are of the view that the treatment of the themes of sexual and reproductive health should be assumed within the context of human rights and should be guaranteed by the States - but under the principle of secularism -, particularly including the prevention of gender and sexual violence, safe motherhood, sexuality education, prevention and care for people with HIV/Aids, respect for the human body, and family planning. These issues are necessary and relevant to a true transformation of our societies.

- We have today, after intense research, the tools we need to facilitate this process, summarized in the Training Guide "The Churches and Sexual and Reproductive Rights" for Faith Communities, Ecumenical Organizations and Networks of Civil-Society Organizations.

Considering also that:

- According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2012), Latin America and the Caribbean is the most unequal region in the world, with over 167 million people living in poverty and around 66 million living in extreme poverty, which means that approximately one every three Latin Americans is poor and one every eight is extremely poor.
- Latin America and the Caribbean, with 148 million young people between 15 and 29 years of age, has the largest number of young people in the history of the region. This poses immediate challenges and merits urgent actions, as currently one every 12 aged 15 to 24 has not completed primary education and has developed no skills to find work, and about one third of young people live in poverty.
- Maternal mortality remains an issue of great concern in the region, although it has declined (the average rate stands at 85 deaths per 100,000 live births); the disparity between countries is very important. Uruguay reported in 2012 a maternal mortality rate of 29 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births and Guatemala, 120 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. In the English-speaking Caribbean, Guyana exhibits a rate of 280 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. And Haiti shows the highest rate in the area, 350 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. Around 95 percent of maternal mortality in Latin America and the Caribbean can be prevented. (Source: By Choice not by Chance, State of world Population 2012; Health Situation in the Americas , Basic Indicators 2012, PAHO and Trends in Maternal Mortality 1990 to 2010, WHO/ UNICEF/ UNFPA/WB).
- Sexual violence against girls and adolescents is mostly perpetrated by relatives: fathers, uncles or close friends, men who should give them love and protection. The region has the second highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the world - after Africa - and it is estimated that 38 percent of pregnant women are under 20. Violence against women is also an issue of great importance in the region. Women in consensual unions or married have experienced acts of physical and sexual violence perpetrated by their partners or husbands; women's murders are growing at a rate higher than that of criminal homicide, and most of these acts occur at home.
- There are between 600,000 and 800,000 people, including children, youth and women in the countries of the region who are victims of trafficking across borders each year, through networks involved in sexual exploitation and similar activities.
- The current situation regarding the response to HIV and Aids hides deep inequalities within and between countries. Such inequalities in the field of prevention remain and tend to affect mostly young people, girls and women.

- The growing role of indigenous and Afro-descendant people reveals stark inequalities in terms of access to opportunities, exercise of rights, political and cultural recognition, as well as all kinds of stigma and discrimination.
- International migration and internal displacement have increased and run parallel to an unfavourable and xenophobic climate; one of the biggest challenges we face includes the need to protect the rights of migrants, particularly women, youth and girls.
- About 10 to 15 percent of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean has some degree of disability, affecting approximately 85 million people. It is common to hear stories of sterilization, forced abortions and other custodial measures relative to freedom of choice by this population.

We, representatives of churches and other institutions present in this Continental Consultation, are aggrieved, hurt and challenged to act in view of these realities.

We also express our commitment to:

- In all areas of education and leadership training of our churches, we will formulate a concrete proposal for action on sexual and reproductive rights and health from a perspective of respect, to ensure that ... “There shall be no more thence an infant of days (...); they shall not bring forth for trouble” (Isaiah 65:20-23), and that people, especially the most excluded, have life in abundance.
- We will continue working to promote and defend human rights and particularly sexual and reproductive rights, from a theological, pastoral and social perspective, in the churches, ecumenical organizations and Civil-Society Organizations of Latin America and the Caribbean.
- We will be inclusive communities that accompany pastorally those who suffer and are hurt by violence, intolerance and lack of justice, receiving us one another, as Christ also received us (Romans 15:7).
- Disseminating and implementing in our churches and communities the themes of sexual and reproductive rights contained in the Cairo Agenda, designed to educate and inform as well as to advocate, using our prophetic voice, for public policies to contribute to promote universal access to Sexual and Reproductive Health.
- Ensuring the full participation of young people as leaders in our faith communities, being at the forefront of development, supporting public policies and promoting their rights and needs in all spheres of life, including sexual and reproductive health, sexual diversity, affectivity and sexuality education, and access to appropriate health services.
- Promoting in the churches, families and society at large the building of training environments and spaces on new masculinities and respect for women and youth, to lessen the impact of widespread violence, gender-based violence and sexual violence on them.
- Supporting public policies and programmes to eliminate existing gender gaps, especially the situations that increase women’s vulnerability.

- Working for the promotion of human rights and the eradication of all forms of discrimination, particularly against women, older people, the environment, indigenous and Afro-descendant people, migrants, Lesbians, Gays, Transgender, Bisexuals and Intersexuals (LGBTI), people with disabilities, and respect for diversity.

"To contribute to a world where every pregnancy is wanted ... every birth is safe ... and every young person reaches their full potential"

Submitted, agreed and adopted in plenary session in the City of Havana, within the framework of the Continental Consultation "The Churches and Sexual and Reproductive Rights," on the 22nd day of May 2013.