

**Inter-Faith Consultation on Children and HIV  
Closing Remarks, 17 January 2008  
Richard Bridle  
Deputy Regional Director  
UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office**

Distinguished guests  
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am very pleased to join you for this the final session of this important consultation. I see from the draft framework and the feedback from colleagues that a lot of ground has been covered during the last three days of discussion and debate.

We are faced with a momentous challenge to create a HIV free world:

- to prevent another child from being born with the disease
- and for those that are, to make sure they receive adequate treatment
- to prevent another child growing up orphaned,
- to mitigate the risk to our young people of getting infected through either drug use or unprotected sex,
- and to ensure for those infected and affected, society guarantees their human rights.

In Asia Pacific, we are at a turning point. We either become complacent and loose the struggle or scale up our response, especially in prevention to halt the further spread of the virus.

This is especially important given the nature of the HIV epidemic in this region, which is largely concentrated among sub-populations and different geographic areas. The region remains highly vulnerable to a generalizing trend given its huge population size, high population mobility and growing economic and gender-based disparities.

On behalf of UNICEF, I would like to thank you for your commitment and partnership in working to scale up the response to HIV and AIDS in this region. This is not an easy task. Yet, as faith based organizations you have proven you can play an instrumental role.

As your discussions have highlighted, the challenges to overcoming the harsh impact of HIV need a concerted commitment. Let me mention just a few that we see as critical to our collective success that were identified:

- Firstly, strengthening the capacity of the family. As your work on the frontline testifies, HIV can tear families apart. On one hand, young people living without the guidance and security of a family environment are often at greater risk of exploitation and the danger of HIV. On the other hand, in many countries, where stigma and discrimination remains strong, the family members can be shunned and isolated.

Your efforts to use your role to serve as counselors, capacity to provide moral strength and guidance, and to foster care and compassion within families and the community are of great benefit.

- Secondly, we still have a lot to do in confronting stigma and discrimination; whose consequences continue to deprive many of those infected and affected of their right to live with dignity and access basic services. I am happy to hear that creating an enabling environment to tackle HIV was a large part of the discussion. We know that changing entrenched attitudes can be tough. We need all leaders but especially religious leaders to use their moral credibility and voice to stand up and demonstrate their compassion to those living positive. We need to forge a zero tolerance for stigma and discrimination towards those living HIV positive.
- Finally, prevention, as mentioned, remains critical in this region. We need you as allies in this enormous task. As identified in your discussions, there is plenty of scope to expand prevention activities. The suggestion to expand life skills beyond the classroom and integrate it with religious outreach and teaching is a great idea.

The consultation has also provided a forum to hear about exciting and creative initiatives underway:

- The expansion of the Sengha Metta project to Buddhist novice monks by enrolling them in working with young people on prevention and awareness.
- The tireless commitment of the churches in PNG to provide emotional support but also to deliver services to those infected and affected.
- The work of the Islamic networks to identify opportunities to advocate and create awareness, especially amongst young people on HIV.

For UNICEF, the last three days has proved a valuable opportunity to learn from your expertise and experiences. We hope that this exchange of ideas and networking has also been worthwhile.

On a regional level, we hope that we can follow up on this initial collaboration by facilitating the interaction and networking between you and other faith based organizations. The ongoing exchange of practical ideas to overcome challenges and barriers, to learn from others experiences, and share resource materials is important. We look forward to working with you to develop the most appropriate mechanisms to continue what has been started.

Ultimately though, the success of this meeting is dependent on how you apply what you have learned from this exchange when you return to your respective countries and communities. As was highlighted in the framework, it is critical to the expansion of your work that it is integrated into national framework and plans. Our colleagues at UNICEF stand ready to see how best they can facilitate this interaction with national Governments and other partners.

On behalf of UNICEF, I would like to thank you for making the journey to be here. We look forward to continuing this collaboration and working with you in the future, to make sure the energy, inspiration and creativity demonstrated during the last three days, is translated into tangible action for children.

I wish you a safe journey back to your respective countries.

Thank you.