

EAST ASIA AND PACIFIC REGIONAL INTERFAITH CONSULTATION MEETING

STATEMENT

We, leaders from Faith Based Organizations and other participants, from 13 countries throughout East Asia and the Pacific met in Bangkok, 15-17 January 2008, with the aim of developing the inter-faith regional framework to strengthen the role of Faith Based Organizations (FBO) in responding to HIV and AIDS and addressing the needs of children affected by HIV and other vulnerable children.

We recognize that HIV and AIDS is taking an increasingly harsh toll on the lives of children. “These effects include: childhood HIV infection and loss of life; the loss of parents and other caregivers; pervasive stigma and discrimination associated with HIV and AIDS; missed opportunities for education; health care and other essential support and services; the deepening poverty of households affected by HIV and AIDS; and the disease burden on the region’s economies and future generations” (Hanoi Declaration). In the Asia and Pacific region alone, more than 1.5 million children are already infected with or affected by HIV and/or AIDS. Yet, children are scarcely visible in the HIV and AIDS response.

We acknowledged that the following policy frameworks provide a sound basis for the work of all partners in the response to Children Affected by HIV and AIDS.

- Universal Access to Prevention Care and Treatment
- Three Ones Principle
- Framework for Protection, Care and Support of Orphans and Vulnerable Children Living in World with HIV and AIDS
- Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS (4Ps)

We believe that our faiths place on us a responsibility to respond to HIV and AIDS. We share a commitment to compassion and care for those in need.

We believe Faith Based Organizations have particular attributes they can contribute to the response to HIV and AIDS. These include:

- strong roots within our communities
- depth of networks and breadth of infrastructure
- respect and trust of our constituents
- moral and ethical competence to work for positive social change

We recognize that Faith Based Organizations are already responding to HIV and AIDS throughout the region. At the Bangkok consultation we were impressed by the many stories told of the work being done by FBOs throughout East Asia and the Pacific. However, we believe more can be done.

At the consultation we FBOs committed ourselves to strengthening our role in the following priority areas identified in the *Framework* as follows:

- Building a supportive environment. We FBOs are among the most powerful and influential social forces in most countries. We play a significant role in influencing the values of most societies. We FBOs will fight stigma and discrimination; challenge social taboos that prevent people accessing vital information to protect themselves from HIV and AIDS. Promoting leadership at all levels and across sectors; advocate for policies, laws, and organizational practices that provide protection for children, families and other affected by HIV and AIDS.
- Mobilizing and supporting community based responses. In many local communities we FBOs are the cornerstone of social networking and organization. We FBOs have unique means of communication to share what is known about HIV and AIDS, care for those affected by the virus, especially children, and deliver essential services to those in need. We FBOs will call upon the goodwill of our members to participate in community service, in particular, those who are affected and impoverished by HIV and AIDS. In many countries we FBOs are in the unique position of being the only civil society based organizations able to operate on a significant scale. We FBOs will build partnerships in local communities and with affected communities; will mobilize community resources to enhance access to essential services; will engage local leaders in responding to the needs of vulnerable community members; to the care and protection of children, including their rights to continue schooling and accessing health care, parenting care and social support services; will organize and support activities that enable community members to talk more openly about HIV and AIDS; will organize cooperative support activities; will promote and support community care for children without family support.
- Strengthening the capacity of families. Family is a key point of reference in all major religions. Religions provide comfort and support for families, as well as social structures in which families interact with the wider community and the rituals and ceremonies in which key family events are enacted (e.g. christenings, weddings, funerals). We FBOs will support efforts to improve household care capacity, economic capacity; provide psychosocial support to affected children and caregivers; strengthen and support child-care; support succession planning; prolong the lives of parents; strengthen young people's life skills. We recognize that strengthening care and protection of children in these circumstances are the first step towards greater prevention of HIV risk and vulnerabilities;
- Ensuring access to essential services. We Faith Based Organizations have a vast presence throughout most countries in the region. We have untapped resources and are already essential service providers in many countries. We Faith Based Organizations will provide resources to increase geographic accessibility, availability, affordability and acceptability of essential services.

We, participants, representing different faith-based organizations in East Asia and the Pacific region, at the conclusion of the Regional Inter-Faith Consultation on Children and HIV/AIDS held on 15-17 January 2008 in Bangkok, Thailand, do hereby affirm

our commitment to strengthen our role and partnership, and together adopt strategies that would integrate evidence-based approaches, right based approach, and gender equity, as well as would ensure the greater involvement of people living with HIV and AIDS (GIPA).

Further, we recommend the following regional framework that seeks to empower FBOs in effectively implementing prevention, care, support and treatment responses to HIV epidemic at the country level through:

- Building partnership between FBOs and other organizations including NGOs, governments, CBOs, and the private sector towards ensuring that programs would utilize the respective strengths of all the parties as well as would integrate these into a national planning framework/strategy;
- Facilitating communication between FBOs at country and regional levels in order to learn from each other, building a shared understanding of best practice and advocating for strengthening the role of FBOs in responding to the needs of children affected by HIV and AIDS. Activities could include training, workshops and conferences, interfaith newsletter, e-learning, web page, regular interfaith meetings
- Strengthening capacity of FBOs to enhance effectiveness across all areas of the HIV response; for example, by integrating evidence-based approaches to improve planning and programming.
- Reducing stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV (PLHIV) by improving community members' participations and policy makers' understanding toward them, and incorporating gender dimension for effective implementation of prevention programs and ensuring the best quality of care, treatment and support for those already infected.
- Improving quality of life of PLHIV: to assure the well being of PLHIV and their children through psychosocial counseling, education on religious teachings, life skills education and social transfer.
- Utilizing the respective strengths of FBOs in mobilizing communities and strengthening families to enhance their role in the protection of children affected by HIV and AIDS and other vulnerable children.
- Knowledge management: promoting exchange of best practices and experience at country and regional levels. e.g. through the development of a management information system that facilitates access to resource materials and evidence of best practice and the promotion of standard monitoring/evaluation frameworks and tools that allow benchmarking of performance against standard indicators to assist in quality improvement. This would also include guides to assist FBOs in using standardized language in order to improve communication and reduce stigmatization.
- Enhancing the role of FBOs in prevention by utilizing our vast networks to reach populations at risk, especially young populations based on lessons learned from other programs, and children whose parents are practicing risk

behaviors or who are already living with HIV and AIDS. We should not set boundaries based on our cultural values to meet the needs of the most at risk, many of them young, especially in HIV prevention. Participatory approach, establishment of safe places, and empowerment through self awareness should be key components of effective preventive education around HIV.

In conclusion, we FBOs affirm our unique contribution to the protection and care of children, and the strengthening of their families.

We acknowledge the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the value it places on the important role families have to play to ensure the survival, development and protection of children;

- We affirm our position as one of the best placed to strengthen the family's response to ensure a safe and protected environment for children, one that is free from the harm of HIV and AIDS.
- We recognize the important and valuable role we have in identifying and promoting the social values that will protect parents and children from HIV infection. as well as in shaping public opinion towards creating a supportive environment that will protect HIV infected and affected children and their families from stigma and discrimination.
- We will strive to develop and strengthen strategic partnerships with other community and regional FBOs, governments, NGOs, development and UN agencies to ensure that appropriate frameworks, structures and policies are put in place to facilitate our effective and successful response to strengthen the capacities of families to respond and cope with the impacts of HIV.
- We will use available resources, frameworks and agreements such as the CRC, UNGASS as well as fora such as ASEAN to raise awareness amongst policy makers of the critical need for an immediate inter- and multi-sectoral collaboration with FBOs at the highest level (national AIDS committee / CCM) - in order to strengthen the capacities amongst FBOs at the community levels in ensuring effective delivery of services that will strengthen the capacities of families to protect children from the adverse impacts of HIV and AIDS.
- We will seek to celebrate the value of life by working together to find common threads in our religious messages and teachings with the aim to empower families and children to make informed choices to protect themselves from HIV and its ensuing impacts.
- We will revisit our cultures, traditions and practices to communicate amongst ourselves and our community to affirm the intrinsic value of children, regardless of gender.