

Engagement with Religious Leaders in South Asia

January 2020



**United Nations Children's Fund
Regional Office for South Asia**

P.O. Box 5815
Lekhnath Marg,
Kathmandu, Nepal

Tel: +977 1-4417082

E-mail: rosa@unicef.org

Websites:

www.unicef.org/rosa
www.facebook.com/unicefsouthasia
www.twitter.com/unicefrosa
www.instagram.com/unicefsouthasia



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“...every religion preaches that every single person is God’s child and that we all are one big family.”

Sri Lanka child participant in focus group for the global study on Faith and Children’s Rights, March–April 2019¹

This report has been prepared to inform discussions at the second meeting of the South Asia Religious Leaders Platform for Children on 28–29 January 2020 in Bhutan. The meeting will bring together delegations of religious leaders and scholars from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, together with UNICEF and child rights partners working at country and regional levels to exchange experiences, to share various religious perspectives on important challenges confronting children and adolescents in South Asia, and to advance the efforts underway by religious leaders to impact the lives and well-being of children, their families and communities throughout the region.

01.

Chapter 01.

Background

Religious leaders have a unique and important role in advancing the rights and well-being of children. Because of their well-established and trusted relationships with communities, religious leaders are able to inform and influence the lives of the families they serve and to promote the care and well-being of children. They are also well placed to address inequity related to societal factors and social norms, and to facilitate efforts towards the realization of the rights of the most vulnerable.

Religious leaders and faith-based communities in South Asia

In South Asia, the role of religious leaders is particularly significant because of the respect they command and because the religious leadership represents the community in matters of faith and maintains a position of integrity and moral authority. The influence of religion permeates daily life. Faith-based groups and organizations help define the values of the family and community. Many religious leaders are skilled communicators who can reach out to their communities and promote child rights and the protection of children. The work of religious leaders is therefore influential in establishing a role model of care and compassion and setting a standard for the benefit of the community. Furthermore, religious groups are often motivated by their faith and values to take action in support of vulnerable members of the community, providing physical, emotional

and spiritual support that strengthens social cohesion. The actions of faith-based communities may be directed towards education, health care, child protection, social justice or life-saving humanitarian response. In situations of conflict, the moral influence of religious leaders enables them to contribute to mediation and reconciliation, and to advocate for the special protection of children and other at-risk members of their communities.

Given the importance of South Asia as a centre of many of the world's major religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism, there is a unique opportunity in the region to bring together diverse religious denominations around common values, in the best interests of children, and to agree on an agenda that will help consolidate the necessary support for children to reach their full potential, and to safeguard them from violence and harm.



Religious leaders shape social values and promote responsible behaviours that respect the dignity and value of all life. Because of the expansive networks of faith-based communities, religious leaders serve as an important conduit of communication for social change and transformation. Religious leaders provide spiritual support and stability, which can help people in their daily lives, and contribute to psychosocial needs in the face of adversity and support for vulnerable children, including children with disabilities. Religious groups also organize and facilitate events and festivals with community members that give meaning to social interactions and can be effective in promoting behaviours for the well-being of children and families. In some cases, the role of religious leaders is combined with other functions. For example, in Afghanistan, many people have faith in the ability of religious leaders to cure health problems. Families may seek remedy from religious leaders, provided in the form of taweez – written verses of the Qur'an – to treat health concerns, while often seeking modern medical care at the same time.²

Religious affiliation can come with increased risks. In India, the children and families of ethnic or religious minorities have increased exposure to stunting, school dropout and other impacts of poverty and exclusion,³ while cultural, religious and other social norms can perpetuate son preference and a lesser status of women and girls.⁴ In Bangladesh, religion has been found to be an additional contributing factor to child marriage, for example, an imam interviewed during the research for the situation analysis on child marriage explained that when a girl “is only 12 or 13 years of age, in the Islamic religious point of view she is of marital age.”⁵

The dynamics of religious influence in South Asia are intertwined with cultural and political dynamics and are related to the colonial and post-colonial histories of the region. And the histories of statehood in each of the countries is connected to the others, for example, in the case of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.⁶ Most

importantly, the religious values of South Asia reflect the central role of religion and faith in the lives of the people. The important role that religion plays in the region is evidenced in the many efforts religious leaders and faith-based groups and organizations make in support of the vulnerable communities they serve, including the following:

In Afghanistan

In 2017, in follow up to the regional meeting with religious leaders, UNICEF Afghanistan started to engage with five of the most respected Islamic leaders on child-focused advocacy. To date, approximately 10,000 religious leaders from across the country have been engaged in a range of activities, including talks given during the Friday prayer, provincial-level Islamic conferences on polio eradication and immunization, and workshops on child protection and preventing violence against children, ending child marriage, promoting girls' education, and priorities in health, nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), with outreach to more than a million community members.

Management shuras or assemblies have been convened in 500 schools, with at least one religious leader included in each shura. The school management shuras conduct monthly meetings, focusing on capacity building in education, child protection, WASH, health and nutrition.

A total of 460 religious leaders have directly benefited from training in polio immunization and a further 5,000 have benefited indirectly. This has included participation in eight provincial Islamic conferences with over 700 religious scholars, and eight mobile teams of religious scholars working full time in support of polio immunization, as well as media debates on radio and television.

A cross-regional conference of religious scholars, convened in April 2019, brought together 22 scholars from Afghanistan and 22 scholars from Pakistan to discuss effective strategies in support of polio immunization and eradication.

In Bangladesh

UNICEF and the Islamic Foundation of Bangladesh (IFB) in the Ministry of Religious Affairs have identified 15 priority areas for religious leaders to promote positive social and behaviour change, including a focus on adolescents to end child marriage and improve school enrolment and retention; social and behaviour change to end drug abuse, and to promote gender equity and positive WASH behaviours; maternal and child health, exclusive breastfeeding and early childhood care; child protection and prevention of violence; birth registration; and a focus on children with disabilities to address related stigma and discrimination. The efforts have resulted in significant achievements, such as strengthening the curriculum affiliated with the Imam Training Academy. The training package, currently under review by a team of Islamic scholars, includes a training of trainers (TOT) module, guidelines and media-related tools, as well as a pre-primary education manual. Roll-out and capacity building will engage 10,000 imams across eight districts.

Capacity-building of imams and female mosque-based pre-primary education teachers is also under way and focuses on interpersonal communication and a curriculum review, as well as a child rights training module, an orientation package of activities and a schedule for roll-out. A total of 400 imams and 200 female teachers have participated in the TOT and subsequently conducted trainings for 2,000 imams and 1,600 female teachers, mobilizing communities on positive social practices. An additional 180 imams received media training with the support of the Ministry of Information.

The partnership with IFB is also building the capacity and skills of imams and female teachers on community engagement, interpersonal communication, child rights, and social and behaviour change for children. Analysis has demonstrated that, while formal religious structures prioritise male leadership, informal leadership positions are often held by women, such as female teachers in madrassas. It is therefore critical to engage both male and female formal and informal leaders, generating age and gender diversity in outreach to communities.

In Bhutan

The monastic education system is a longstanding tradition with close to 6,000 boys and girls living in more than 220 monasteries and 28 nunneries across the country. UNICEF works with the Central Monastic Body and Bhutan Nuns Foundation to support the well-being of child monks and nuns and provide support in the areas of WASH, education, child protection and behaviour change. Monastic institutions also receive support to improve the health and well-being of monks and nuns through the Sports for Development (S4D) programme. The S4D curriculum will be endorsed in 2020 by the monastic body for use in monastic institutions to promote physical education, health and well-being.

UNICEF is working closely with government and civil society partners to introduce a standardized curriculum for the capacity development of children and adolescents on child protection and the prevention of violence against children. As a result, five organizations, including the Central Monastic Body, now use a standardized training package for adolescents on preventing, recognizing and reporting violence against children. Since it was introduced in 2017, more than 4,500 young monks and nuns have been trained to protect themselves from violence and exploitation. UNICEF is supporting the implementation of the training and plans to cover all monastic institutions and nunneries by 2022.

To expand equitable access and use of WASH services, three monastic institutions, housing 173 child monks and nuns, have been provided with toilets, as well as safe drinking water, handwashing facilities and water heating systems. Furthermore, 1,410 monks in 26 monastic institutions in three districts (Paro, Punakha and Thimphu) now have access to safe sanitation through safe toilets (SaTo) technology. Additionally, 30 monks from those institutions were trained to install SaTo toilets. To improve menstrual hygiene practices in nunneries, the 'Red Dot Campaign' was launched on Menstrual Hygiene Management Day and sanitary pads were distributed to 17 nunneries across the country.

In India

Engaging with faith-based organizations and leaders is an effective means of outreach to remote and rural areas, helping to build relationships across diverse social and economic groups. In addition to extensive work with the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA, see text box #3) engagement with religious leaders has helped build support for immunization and polio eradication, particularly with Muslim leaders in marginalized communities. Religious leaders have come together to support the campaign and urged parents to immunize their children. The Social Mobilization Network includes more than 8,000 communities and engages those mobilizing in household outreach, helping to overcome resistance to immunization and identifying high-risk, hard-to-reach children.

Technical support was provided to the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog) and the Piramal Foundation in 25 districts across seven states (Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) to engage faith leaders in support of improved health and nutrition indicators. Collaboration with faith leaders as influencers and advocates in communities has helped initiate social and behaviour change, though gaps remain in changing social norms concerning child marriage and teenage pregnancy.

In 2019, UNICEF and the Piramal Foundation, together with NITI Aayog, organized capacity building for 150 faith leaders in Bihar, Assam and Uttar Pradesh, who will serve as master trainers to raise awareness through district- and block-level cascade trainings. Areas of focus for messaging include safe sanitation and menstrual hygiene. Also in 2019, female faith leaders – with outreach that numbers in the millions – came together to end child marriage in communities across India.

In Nepal

Religious leaders are well positioned to raise awareness in their communities about the harmful impact of violence on children and to advocate for positive norms, attitudes and practices to prevent violence against children in homes, schools, institutions and communities. Interfaith efforts are also important to create synergies and contribute to religious and social harmony and mutual trust among the different faiths. The ongoing partnership with the National Inter-Religious Network (NIRN) to end child marriage brings together religious leaders from Hindu, Christian, Islamic, Baha'i and Buddhist faiths. A training manual was developed, and more than 200 interfaith leaders have been sensitized and continue to participate in advocacy that promotes an end to both child marriage and the practice of *chaupadi* (the practice which requires girls and women to live outside their homes during menstruation).

In Pakistan

Religious leaders are a critical component of community engagement, for outreach to men. UNICEF works with religious leaders from different groups across almost all programme priorities, including child survival, and development and protection, and is starting to engage on issues related to early childhood development through the roll-out of an integrated parenting package in 2020. Mosque announcements and community mobilization of religious leaders has been prioritized during school enrolment drives and religious leaders are also the key influencers for nutrition services.

The polio programme in Pakistan is threatened by an anti-vaccination campaign. In that context religious leaders are the most credible and influential partners for disseminating information to support immunization. In addition, religious organizations have the largest network and presence across the country, including in the most remote, marginalized and at-risk communities. Partnership with the National Islamic Advisory Group and provincial scholars' taskforces brings together renowned and influential religious leaders to support efforts to eradicate polio. In addition, a cadre of Religious Support Persons identified from every denomination have contributed to polio and other immunization campaigns through social mobilization and community engagement, particularly to address vaccination refusal in certain areas.

Under menstrual hygiene management (MHM), UNICEF and the Council of Islamic Ideology organized a consultative meeting with more than 300 scholars from different groups on how to deliberate with religious leaders across the country to dispel misconceptions and promote positive social change on menstrual hygiene. Through this engagement, Pakistan's Council of Islamic Ideology has published a review of papers on the subject and written over a dozen articles that were published in mainstream media.

It has also created a platform for male and female adolescents to openly and confidently seek clarity regarding religious perspectives on the topic, including during the launch of the UNICEF MHM campaign 'NoChutti' where over 300 boys and girls participated, with tens of thousands of others following the proceedings via social media.

In Sri Lanka

Religious leaders' forums and networks have proved effective to involve religious communities in promoting child rights, child protection and child development, creating a link between faith-based communities and existing child protection mechanisms and structures (see text box #2). In addition, the proactive engagement of religious leaders has reinforced the participation of adolescents and young people in violence prevention, peace and reconciliation in both urban and rural settings.

In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks that caused tragic death and injury, several schools were closed and school attendance was low due to concerns for the safety and security of children. A three-week Back-to-School campaign was launched for families and communities struggling to recover. In addition to media, UNICEF's senior management advocated with high-level religious leaders to get their support on increased school attendance. The campaign resulted in a significant increase in school attendance, from 40 per cent to nearly 100 per cent.

In Trincomalee district, the establishment of a women and children's desk in the Sampoor police station, included working closely with religious communities and faith-based organizations. Links were established at the divisional level with the women and children's desk and the Village Child Development Committee, as well as the Religious Leader's Forum, to promote children's rights and community education on violence against children.

This led to a significant improvement in violence prevention and child protection response.

In all areas of development programming, as well as in humanitarian response (see text box #1), UNICEF and its partners share many of the values of religious leaders and their communities. By working in partnership with religious leaders in South Asia, the care and protection of children and the safeguarding of their rights can be amplified from the smallest village to the largest city, from districts and provinces to national and international levels.

World religions and the Convention on the Rights of the Child share common values

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) reflects deeply-held values embedded within religious traditions that uphold the dignity of every child and the centrality of the family in building strong communities. These core values expressed by the scriptures of the world's major religions, and enshrined in the CRC, include the sanctity of life (CRC guiding principle), the primary role of the family for the growth and well-being of the child (articles 7 and 8), and the importance of the child's spiritual development (articles 17 and 27). The link between faith-based communities and the CRC has not been widely recognized, however, because many religious leaders and faith-based groups may not be familiar with the CRC and have not used it to promote their agenda for children. Likewise, many child rights advocates are not aware of the contributions of faith-based communities in child development and child protection. The 30th anniversary of the adoption of the CRC provides an opportunity for reflection on the potential for religious leaders and child rights activists to join together in mutual understanding of their core values, and to advance a common agenda for children.

Engaging religious leaders and faith-based communities in promoting the CRC as a guiding reference and advocacy tool to achieve positive results for children is not new. Since its adoption thirty years ago, in 1989, the CRC has generated unprecedented support for child health and survival, for education for all children, and for positive social norms that contribute to the prevention of violence against children. These impressive achievements for children have been possible, in large part, because of local community-based actions, often integrated with the work of faith-based communities and the leadership provided by religious groups in support of children's survival and development. In practice, the CRC provides a comprehensive framework for religious leaders and faith-based communities to act in the best interests of children. With the commitment and combined efforts of religious leaders and child rights advocates, much more can be accomplished.

Today significant gains have been made in tackling many of the challenges facing children, their families and communities. At the same time, new threats have emerged that require focused and collective action, including the proliferation of conflict, increasing natural disasters, structural violence and the impacts of climate change. The CRC provides a holistic framework to address persistent challenges to children's survival and development, as well as to address new challenges that threaten to undermine progress that has been achieved. The CRC is an effective tool that bridges across diverse religions, connecting faith-based communities and joining national and local government actors, civic organizations and child rights agencies and advocates, to come together for the common purpose of children's well-being and protection.

The CRC framework and the complementary Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have the potential to motivate a broad coalition, with the support of religious leaders and communities, to further amplify a common agenda and stated goals, and to make an even greater difference in children's lives.

02.



Chapter 02.

Faith and Positive Change for Children: Framework for action

In 2018 UNICEF, working in partnership with the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities and Religions for Peace, formed an advisory group of international faith-based NGOs and launched a global initiative on Faith and Positive Change for Children (FPCC).

This was done in recognition of the importance of religious leaders and faith-based groups as influencers of behaviour change and as motivators of both individual and collective action. While partnerships between religious leaders and development and humanitarian actors are longstanding, too often the collaboration has been ad hoc or opportunistic, limiting the actual achievements. The purpose of the FPCC initiative is to build a systematic and sustainable engagement between faith groups and children's agencies and advocates that fully respects the knowledge, experience and capacities of all partners, in order to mobilize positive social and behaviour change for the well-being of children and their families, including the most vulnerable and marginalized.

The focus of the FPCC initiative is cross-cutting: to address a wide range of programme actions, including to reduce neo-natal mortality and malnutrition to increase school enrolment, to prevent violence against children, to eliminate harmful social norms such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, to eliminate open defecation and improve sanitation and hygiene, to promote inclusion and end discrimination, to strengthen environmental protection, and to engage across social, economic and religious divisions to build peace and promote dialogue.

Addressing harmful practices in the context of tradition and religious beliefs

The FPCC initiative aims to mobilize positive social and behaviour change for children, families and communities. At the same time, FPCC partners recognize that faith-based leaders and actors can be divisive and act as drivers of exclusion, marginalization and conflict, with the potential for religious practices to, at times, reinforce harmful traditions that may put children and women at risk or restrict access to life-saving services. The initiative is therefore geared to support religious leadership and faith-based communities in conducting a review of religious texts and encouraging positive social and behaviour change and actions that improve the well-being of children and families.

By convening a network that is participatory and well-informed, religious actors can reinforce their leadership role in the communities they serve and also work together across diverse faith communities, based on common values for the well-being and protection of children. In situations of crisis, the role of religious leaders and faith actors is heightened and can help promote interfaith dialogue, conflict resolution and reconciliation, and can also provide spiritual and psychological support to at-risk or marginalized communities.

Strategies to engage and mobilize religious leaders

The strategies to engage and mobilize religious leaders and faith-based communities in the FPCC initiative include:

- Strengthening of the global evidence base on faith and social and behaviour change, including a literature review conducted in 2018 and a mapping of country level partnerships and efforts underway.
- Review and consolidation of existing faith-based resource materials, including analysis of relevant religious texts and resources used by faith-based organizations in their work for children.
- Development of country case studies on faith and social and behaviour change in collaboration with 17 country teams, including interviews with faith-based universities, faith-based organizations and national governments.
- Development of a co-created theory of change and programming guidance for faith-based organizations on social and behaviour change, outlining levels of influence, approaches and strategies, behavioural outcomes and results for children.
- Capacity development of local faith actors to support a country-level roll-out of the initiative, adapted to address local priorities and challenges.
- Advocacy for implementation of agreed principles and actions on faith and social and behaviour change, working with faith actors directly engaged with families and communities, and expanding outreach to cooperate with non-faith actors and activists.
- Expanded partnerships for scaling up and providing quality assurance for the initiative, including consultations with a Global Advisory Group of more than 15 international faith-based organizations.

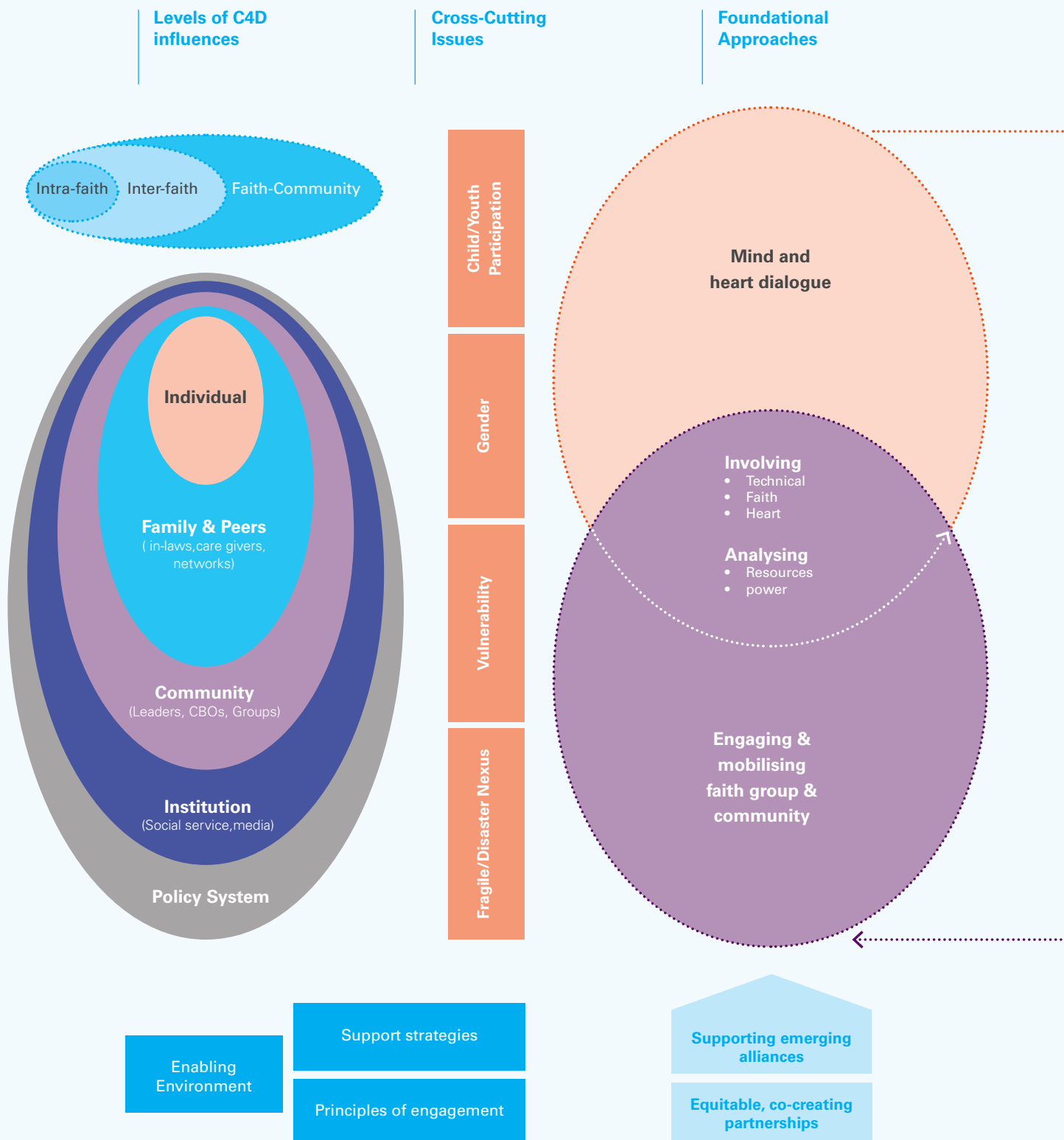
As part of the FPPC initiative to build a broader partnership between faith actors and child rights advocates, and to mobilize a more systematic collaboration for children's development and protection, UNICEF partnered with religious leaders, together with academic partners and local and national government representatives to co-create a theory of change. The approach is adaptable in diverse situations and addresses a wide range of development and protection issues, shifting the engagement with religious leaders and faith-based communities from ad hoc projects to promote a more sustainable and comprehensive programming approach. This approach engages faith actors as full partners to achieve practical and measurable results for children's development and protection.

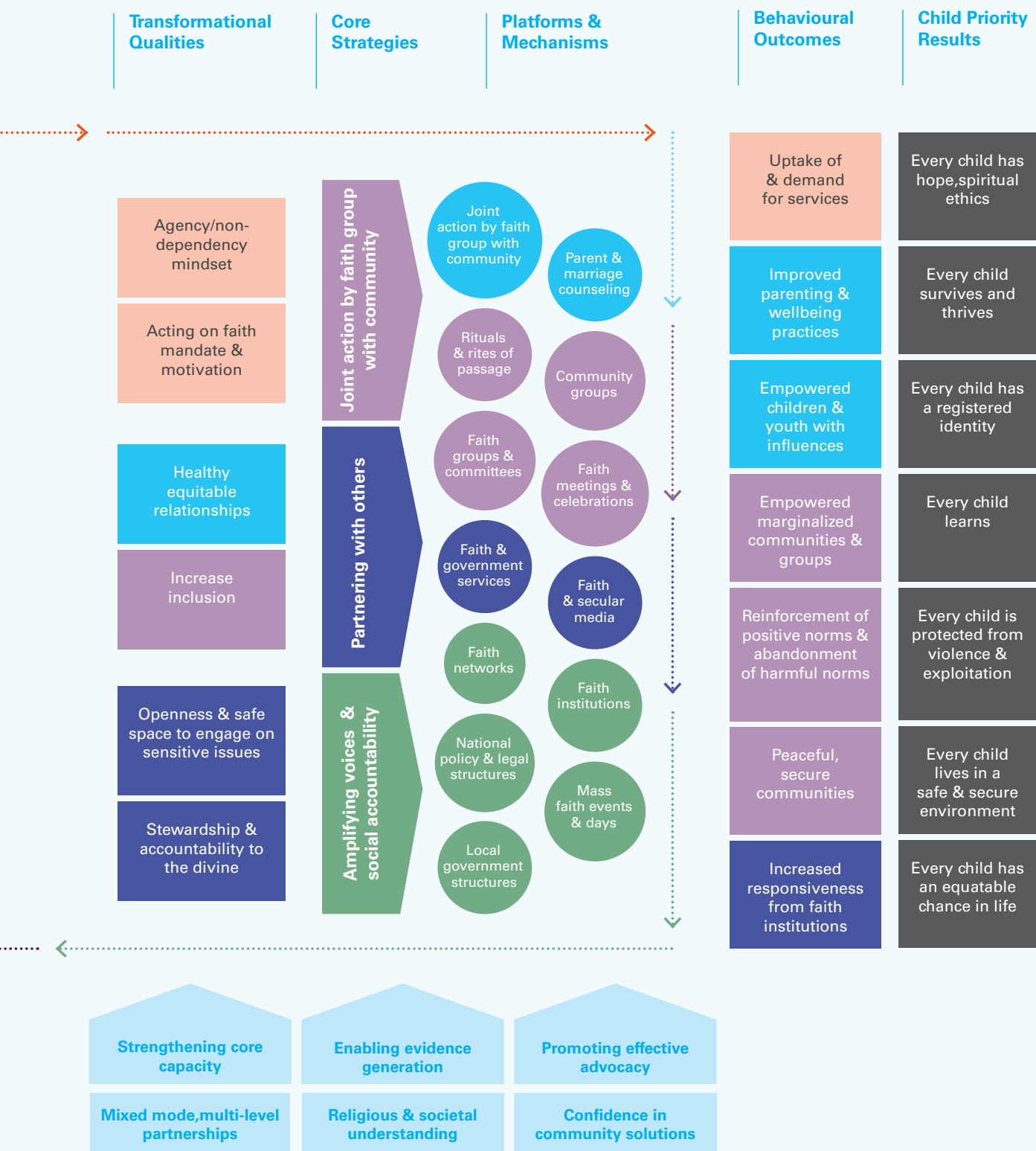
An advisory group of faith-based organizations was convened to provide technical inputs throughout the process and to field test the approach, informed by insights from faith networks and communities. The collaboration was informed by previous efforts, including the UNICEF Communication for Development (C4D) global theory of change for social and behaviour change, the Joint Learning Initiative theory of change for faith groups and community mobilization and evidence gathered from the literature review, the analysis of content of faith-based resources, and the 17 case studies of UNICEF programmes at country level with faith-based organizations. Outreach was expanded by convening a workshop with partners from 20 countries, representing all regions and faiths. The core strategies of the theory of change are joint actions by faith groups and communities, partnerships and amplifying voices for social accountability. Emphasis is placed on local faith groups who work directly with communities, to build their capacity and strengthen their networks. Levels of influence expand from individual, to family and peers, to community, to institutional, to policy and systems levels of influence. The key behavioural outcomes include:

- Uptake of and demand for services to improve children's well-being.
- Improved parenting and dialogue within families.
- Children and youth enabled and empowered to participate.
- Empowered marginalized groups and communities.
- Reinforcement of positive norms and abandonment of harmful practices.
- Increase in national and local government systems that facilitate engagement of faith actors in social and behavioural change.

Joint learning initiative of Faith and Local Communities (JLI) Collaboration with UNICEF Communication for Development Division (C4D)

Theory of faith for social and behaviour change





The local-level engagement helps empower faith-based organizations and lowers the risk of them being instrumentalized by government and international actors. At the institutional level, faith-based organizations are able to access marginalized communities and establish a long-term presence based on beliefs and values held in common with the community. This can also involve risks due to traditional practices and patriarchal systems that can undermine the rights of children and women or introduce bias that excludes or marginalizes communities of another faith. The theory of change is therefore being field tested with the full engagement of local faith actors to identify barriers to change, examine interpretations of scripture or practices that lead to harmful behaviours, and engage community members, in particular women and young people as change agents.

At the same time, local faith-based organizations may face significant challenges when working in partnership with United Nations agencies, such as complying with bureaucratic requirements and completing necessary paperwork for programme cooperation agreements. Other challenges include the difficulty faith-based organizations may encounter when faced with the perception that United Nations agencies have imposed on their independence and/or relationship with their communities. For this reason, it is critical that United Nations agencies and local faith-based organizations enter into a full partnership that co-convenes both parties around a common agenda, representing shared goals with objectives that are mutually beneficial and builds trust over the long term.

The 2020 agenda for the FPCC is focused on building a systematic approach to engagement with religious leaders and faith communities in order to motivate social and behaviour change for children's well-being. The intention is to:

- Scale up efforts to roll out FPCC at regional, country and local levels, including to prepare collaborative guidance, develop capacity and mobilize resources;
- Mobilize women and young people to take ownership and initiative of advocacy and actions for children;
- Disseminate findings and evidence to inform advocacy and action at the local level; and
- Conduct ongoing monitoring, evaluation, documentation and evidence-generation.

The success of the roll-out will depend on support for a network of diverse faith groups to create alliances that are owned by the community and not imposed by outside international or government actors. The approach also needs to be adapted to fit the priorities and agenda of local conditions and address the obstacles specific to the needs of the community. Support is needed to help faith-based organizations strengthen their governance and financial systems and to increase advocacy, both to formulate messages in the best interests of children and to amplify the voices of the communities. Another gap that needs to be addressed is the evidence base to inform priorities and programmes, and to identify indicators for monitoring and evaluation of progress achieved. Additional field testing will inform the development of global guidance to expand the influence of faith-based organizations in advocacy and programming for children.

Among the key cross-cutting programme areas of the FPPC framework that are particularly relevant for South Asia, are the following:

- **Intersecting values:** Religious values – including human dignity and respect for every human being, justice, compassion, peace and service to others – are in agreement with the principles of the CRC. The common ground of religious values and CRC principles provide a foundation for cooperation and collective action.
- **Partnerships to prevent violence against children:** Religious leaders and communities can come together to build an interfaith partnership with civil society organizations and United Nations agencies to advocate with policymakers, media, civil society and other institutions to prevent violence against children.
- **Participation of children, families, communities:** Supporting the agency and dignity of children by promoting their meaningful participation in the life of their religious communities is an important way to strengthen the protection of children and promote their well-being.
- **Gender equality and youth empowerment:** The CRC provides a strong foundation for the promotion of gender equality and empowering youth to realize their full potential
- **Reconciliation and inclusive partnerships:** In emergency situations and in the aftermath of violence and conflict, the influence of religious leaders can contribute to reconciliation and recovery efforts, and advocate for the special protection of children and other particularly vulnerable members of their communities.



03.

Chapter 03.

A global perspective

Religious groups and actors were actively involved in the drafting of the CRC, making important contributions to the core principles and subsequently promoting its ratification and implementation.²³

Religious leaders have also played a key role in advocacy for child rights, including participation in the forums of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) convened in different regions of the world, bringing together more than 1,000 religious leaders and grassroots children's advocates from diverse traditions to join United Nations agencies and other partners in promoting interfaith cooperation for children:

In 2000, the first GNRC forum in Tokyo, Japan, convened 294 religious leaders and actors, meeting with child rights advocates on 'Prayer and Practice for the Future of Children.'
In 2004, the second GNRC forum in Geneva, Switzerland, convened 359 religious leaders and actors, meeting with child rights advocates on 'Learning to Share: Values, Action, Hope.'
In 2008, the third GNRC forum in Hiroshima, Japan, convened 353 religious leaders and actors, meeting with child rights advocates to launch the 'Learning to Live Together: An

Intercultural and Interfaith Programme of Ethics Education,' to support educators in formal and non-formal education to foster values and spirituality in children. The World Day of Prayer and Action for Children was also launched and is celebrated yearly on International Children's Day, 20 November.

In 2012, the fourth GNRC forum in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, convened 470 religious leaders and actors, meeting with child rights advocates on 'Ending Poverty. Enriching Children: Inspire. Act. Change.' Forum participants launched the new Interfaith Initiative to End Child Poverty.

In 2017, the fifth GNRC forum, in Panama City, Panama, convened 526 religious leaders and actors, meeting with child rights advocates on 'Ending Violence Against Children: Faith Communities in Action'.⁷

There have also been numerous global and regional declarations on the rights of the child by religious leaders, including:

- 2006 Rabat Declaration on Children in the Islamic World: https://www.fasngo.org/assets/files/resources/RABAT_DECLARATION_EN.pdf
- 2006 Kyoto Declaration, a Multi-Religious Commitment to Confront Violence Against Children: <https://www.unicef.org/violencestudy/pdf/Final%20Declaration%20VAC-28%20Aug-Kyoto.pdf>
- 2017 The Beirut Declaration and its commitments on faith for rights: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/FaithForRights.aspx>
- 2017 Panama Declaration on Ending Violence against Children, released at the fifth GNRC forum: <https://arigatouinternational.org/en/latest-news/news/205-gnrc-5th-forum-the-panama-declaration-on-ending-violence-against-children>
- 2017 The Rome Declaration – Child Dignity in the Digital World: <https://www.childdignity.com/blog/declaration-of-rome>
- 2017 Churches' Commitments to Children, following on the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC): <https://commitments-to-children.oikoumene.org/>
- 2018 Global Partners Forum for Faith Action for Children on the Move: Action Plan: <https://jilifc.com/resources/faith-action-for-children-on-the-move-action-plan/>
- 2018 Abu Dhabi Declaration of the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities: Child Dignity in the Digital World:⁸ https://iafsc.org/application/files/5915/4409/8156/The_Declaration_of_Abu_Dhabi_-_20th_Nov_2018_EN12.pdf

Building on these global initiatives, on 19 November 2019, in commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the CRC, the global study 'Faith and Child Rights: A Multi-Religious Study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child' was launched by Arigatou International, in partnership with UNICEF and a team of child rights experts in close collaboration with the former Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, GNRC and other partners.

The purpose of the study is to galvanize religious leaders, religious communities and child-focused faith-based organizations to take action in support of children's rights. The study highlights the often undocumented yet significant role that the diverse communities of the world's faith traditions have played in the preparation, adoption, ratification and implementation of the CRC over the past three decades and which continues today. The study also serves as a reference for child rights advocates, policymakers, academics, child-focused organizations and foundations, as well as children's and youth groups to assess the ongoing work of religious leaders in promoting the CRC and building a network of diverse leadership among faith-based communities, to strengthen mutual support and establish a common agenda going forward. The global study concludes with recommendations for each stakeholder group.

The study recommends that religious leaders become familiar with the CRC and incorporate it into their efforts to advance child well-being in communities, convening dialogues and supporting child rights, and advocating to end violence against children, to address discrimination and injustice, and to promote equality. In addressing child rights advocates, the study recommends partnering with religious leaders and communities to advance children's rights and well-being, and to involve religious communities in advocacy and actions, as well as supporting the participation of children.⁹

A key objective of the global study is to support efforts to implement the global recommendations at the regional level, taking into consideration the local dynamics, and working to establish common ground between religious leaders and child rights advocates. The UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) is the first region to pursue a regional agenda in follow up to the global study, taking the initiative to convene and mobilize religious leaders and faith-based organizations in order to adapt the findings and recommendations of the global study and to advance regional, national and local priorities for children.

The convening of religious leaders across South Asia is intended to engage representatives of the major religions in building a regional platform and coalition of faith-based communities and child rights advocates with a common agenda to promote the CRC and combine efforts to achieve the SDGs. The ability of religious leaders to significantly contribute to this achievement is linked to their work at the community level. In that capacity, South Asia has the opportunity to play a lead role in strengthening the commitment of religious leaders to use their networks and influence to promote the CRC and to achieve positive results for children.

04.



Chapter 04.

South Asia region: Building momentum for CRC implementation and the SDGs

In September 2017, UNICEF ROSA convened the first ever South Asia Religious Leaders Platform for Children.

Expert delegations from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, representing the seven ROSA countries, gathered together with UNICEF staff, regional religious scholars and theological bodies for a two-day meeting in Kathmandu, Nepal. More than 30 religious leaders attended, providing a unique opportunity to exchange experiences and to share various religious perspectives on important challenges confronting children and adolescents in South Asia.

The September 2017 meeting agreed on five priority actions in follow up to the meeting, specifically:

1. UNICEF ROSA to create an online platform to serve as a space for facilitating advocacy efforts and behaviour and social change communication by religious leaders for children in the region.
2. UNICEF ROSA to set the foundation for future events with religious leaders and other relevant actors with the objective of developing structures and defined relationships shaped by shared values.
3. UNICEF country offices to train religious leaders on children's rights issues to equip them with the appropriate technical skills and ensure that the right messages are being shared in awareness raising and behavioural change activities.

4. UNICEF country offices to facilitate greater interfaith dialogue within and among different religions within their respective countries on child rights.
5. All participants in the event pledged to use their moral influence and leadership to advance children's rights through active and effective participation in efforts to reduce violence against children, increase children's access to education opportunities, and foster their survival and development.

In addition to the priority actions, the 2017 meeting highlighted six regional headline issues where religious leaders and faith-based organizations have potential to advance results for children. Subsequently these priorities have been assessed and informed in relation to the SDGs:

Preventing child marriage

- While the rate of child marriage has been declining in South Asia since 1995, the region remains home to the largest total number of child brides, with more than 40 per cent of the global burden. This is due both to the legacy of child marriage in previous generations and to the region's large population.¹⁰ Religious leaders have stood together and publicly stated their opposition to child marriage with a common message: 'Every religion believes that marriage should only take place when the boys and girls are capable enough to shoulder the responsibilities of raising a family' which is agreed to be at the legal age of 18 at the minimum.
- South Asia target: 500,000 child marriages averted by 2021 (SDG 5.3).¹¹

Preventing new-born deaths

- Babies born in South Asia are nine times more likely to die in the first month than a child in a high-income country, and twice as likely to die as a baby in the Middle East and North Africa.¹² At the first ever meeting of the South Asia Religious Leaders Platform for Children in 2017, participants voiced their unequivocal support for child survival and development.
- South Asia target: Reduce new-born deaths from 28 per 1,000 live births in 2016 to 21 per 1,000 live births by 2021. This will save an estimated 500,000 new-borns (SDG 3.2).¹³
- Reducing the numbers of out-of-school children
- In South Asia, an estimated 11.3 million children of primary school age (5.8 million girls and 5.5 million boys), and 20.6 million children of secondary school age (8.9 million girls and 11.6 million boys) do not go to school, and only 69 per cent of children have access to early childhood education.¹⁴ There is a strong correlation between poverty, minorities – including religious minorities – and rates of children out of school. Schools owned or managed by faith-based organizations are able to lead in efforts to increase child enrolment and champion gender equality by challenging existing harmful practices and mindsets. Educating children begins with educating parents, and religions can play that role in faith-based communities.
- South Asia target: By 2021, 10 million out-of-school girls and boys are enrolled and learning in pre-primary, primary and secondary schools (SDG 4.1).¹⁵

Preventing stunting

- In South Asia, 36 per cent of children under the age of 5 are stunted. The three main causes of child stunting are poor diets in the first two years of life, poor nutrition of women before and during pregnancy, and poor sanitation.¹⁶ Reducing stunting prevalence requires efforts beyond health interventions as a focus on social and behaviour change is equally needed to ensure positive change. It is vital, to this end, to mobilize religious leaders as change agents to advocate for nutrition related issues in the communities they serve, and to bring about behavioural change.
- South Asia target: 10 million fewer children with stunted growth and development by 2021 (SDG 2.1).¹⁷

Preventing open defecation and other WASH interventions

- Diarrhoea, caused by poor sanitation and hygiene, and unsafe drinking water, remains a major cause of child malnutrition, disease and death in South Asia with 177,000 child deaths due to diarrhoea. Two-thirds of the global population practicing open defecation lives in South Asia, mostly in rural areas.¹⁸ Behaviour change related to sanitation and hygiene practices is complex and requires multi-level and multi-sectoral engagement. Religious leaders in South Asia have the potential to significantly contribute to the regional efforts to advance child rights and tackle WASH issues.
- South Asia target: 148 million fewer individuals practice open defecation by 2021 (SDG 6.2).¹⁹

Immunizing all children and eradicating polio

- UNICEF is a key partner of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI), contributing to global efforts that have reduced the number of children paralysed by polio from 350,000 in 1988 to 22 in 2017. These 22 children all live in Afghanistan or Pakistan, making South Asia the key to global polio eradication.²⁰

- The Islamic Advisory Group was established in 2013 to support GPEI. One of the objectives of GPEI is to partner with national and international Islamic leaders who can help strengthen community trust to reach all children with polio and other vaccinations.
- South Asia target: i) Polio eradication, putting an end to new polio cases; ii) All children fully immunized, reaching 3.3 million additional children by 2021 with a focus on the most marginalized.²¹

The 2020 meeting of South Asian religious leaders will take the opportunity to review progress made since September 2017 in achieving the six regional headline issues linked to the CRC framework and the SDGs; emphasizing the role of religious leaders and faith-based organizations, and identifying good practices and lessons learned, noting in particular:

There is a strong link between the CRC and the SDGs in supporting the well-being of children, their families and communities, with many SDG targets directly related to the articles of the convention.

Religious leaders and communities, along with other key actors and stakeholders, can play an important role in helping to achieve the SDG targets for children.

Country-based efforts to engage religious leaders in CRC implementation are underway in each of the countries of South Asia. Summaries of those ongoing efforts to meet the SDG goals will be presented and discussed, highlighting and taking stock of achievements and challenges.

Text Box #1

Bangladesh

Engagement with religious leaders in Rohingya refugee camps and host communities

In order to disseminate life-saving messages, promote positive behaviour change, build social cohesion and prevent harmful childcare practices among Rohingya refugees living in the camps of Ukhiya and Teknaf in Cox's Bazar district and in host communities, UNICEF partners with religious leaders and faith-based organizations, working together with civil society organizations.

The collaboration between UNICEF and religious leaders and faith-based organizations in Bangladesh is longstanding. On 7 June 2017, two months prior to the arrival of Rohingya refugees in August of that year, UNICEF and the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh (IFB), an autonomous directorate under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the period of 2017 to 2020. The MoU provides a solid foundation for strengthening the partnership at national and sub-national levels.

Three months after the influx of refugees in Cox's Bazar, in November 2017, Rohingya community leaders and imams participated in an advocacy meeting to help scale up hygiene promotion, immunization, nutrition, Vitamin A and EPI/measles among the

refugee community. During the first year of the response, UNICEF and its community mobilization partners, including the NGOs, PULSE and BRAC, sensitized 1,000 imams (as of May 2018) through advocacy and consultation on different topics, ranging from sanitation and hygiene practices to culturally sensitive issues such as child marriage and gender-based violence. The imams, in turn, disseminated critical messages to families in their respective blocks and mobilized community members through religious dialogue, resources and rituals, including khutba (Friday sermon), masjids and other religious practices.

In 2018, UNICEF and IFB expanded their collaboration with imams and religious leaders across Rohingya and host communities. The aim is to reach 150,000 people in the Rohingya camps and 50,000 from host communities, including Sadar, Ramu, Ukhiya and Teknaf upazilas (sub-districts) in Cox's Bazar.

Text Box #2

Sri Lanka

Spirituality in early childhood for the prevention of violence

In 2019, the International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality organized three national-level round table discussions in Sri Lanka focusing on early childhood for the prevention of violence. The round table discussions were aimed at increasing awareness about how violence in early childhood affects the development of a child's brain and learning abilities, and how to mobilize religious communities and their networks to break the cycle of violence. The discussions engaged different stakeholders to strengthen norms and values that support non-violent, respectful, nurturing, positive and gender-equitable relations and contribute to positive parenting practices.

In Sri Lanka, religion plays a significant role in people's lives. This is true not only because of the high percentage of people practicing religion, but also because religious and faith-based institutions provide a large portion of services, including health care and education. The roundtable recognized the moral authority and the influence of religious leaders among their communities in three key areas:

- Challenging norms and values that condone violence;
- Supporting parents and caregivers;
- Enhancing education and life skills that support the creation of safe and inclusive school environments.

With over 98 per cent of the population in Sri Lanka adhering to Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam or Christianity, religious communities have a significant role in ending violence against children. Religious leaders can foster values such as empathy, respect and compassion based on religious narratives and teachings. They are also best positioned to support families in nurturing values and spirituality to develop a sense of identity that is respectful and inclusive. This is a critical priority in Sri Lanka where more than two decades of armed conflict has left communities vulnerable to a normalization of violence in society.

The round table discussions resulted in the development of a booklet about the importance of children's well-being in early childhood, and the support needed from parents, caregivers, educators and the community to provide nurturing care. The booklet, based on the reflections of local religious leaders and other stakeholders in the Sri Lanka context, questions social and cultural norms that condone violence in early childhood, reflects on the impact of violence on children, and promotes positive change at home, in school, in religious places of worship, and in the community as a whole.

Text Box #3

India

The Global Interfaith WASH Alliance

Religious leaders and faith-based communities are integrated into the cultural and social fabric of India. Faith-based communities can contribute social, spiritual and material assets in partnership with child rights organizations to enhance programme objectives and to address the needs of the most vulnerable children and families.

- The Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA) in India engages with leaders across all religions and faiths. The initial exclusive focus on WASH has since expanded to include messaging on gender equality and disaster risk reduction. A recent GIWA publication, in collaboration with UNICEF, 'WASH in Faith', focuses on the importance various religions place on WASH behaviours, including the following highlights:
 - The initial Worship for WASH Summit in 2014, in Rishikesh, was attended by 200 faith leaders. In 2015 and 2016 GIWA promoted hygiene and sanitation at numerous events such as the Ganga Sagar Mela and Kumbha Mela, as well as convening a round table meeting of faith leaders to improve hygiene and sanitation practices and end open defecation.
 - In 2019, GIWA marked the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Gandhi Jayanti by supporting WASH messaging and raising awareness among faith leaders, including women and tribal minorities attending Kumbh Mela 2019. Additional issues in the advocacy outreach at the Mela included child protection and women's empowerment.
- The campaign 'Siksha se Swabhiman' ('yes to education, no to child marriage') was also launched at the Kumbh Mela in 2019, in partnership with GIWA. The campaign focused on raising awareness to empower adolescents, especially girls, and also engaging parents and decision-makers to overcome negative social norms that favour child marriage.
- In 2017, Ammachi Labs at Amrita University, together with the United Nations Democracy Fund and in support of the SDGs, launched a pan-India sanitation initiative in more than 30 villages across 21 states that empowers more than 7,000 women to promote sanitation and end open defecation. The success of the initiative is due, in part, to the Ammachi design mould-based toilet which reduces construction time and costs, while also training women in masonry, plumbing and plastering skills needed for construction. To date, 16 villages have been certified open defecation free. Another project of Ammachi Labs has been the design of a hand-washing robot for use in positive hygiene behaviour trainings in rural and tribal schools. In addition, in 2019, Amrita University provided the Indian government with more than US\$1 million for the construction of toilets and was awarded recognition by the government and by the United Nations Secretary-General.

Opportunities to strengthen the partnership between faith actors and child rights advocates

- **Common core values:** The common values expressed by the scriptures of the world's major religions and enshrined in the CRC are a bridge between religious actors and child rights advocates, and can become the basis of a partnership to facilitate community mobilization, foster social cohesion, and motivate positive social and behaviour change for children's well-being.
- **Systematic approach:** A shift is needed from ad hoc partnerships between religious leaders and child rights organizations to a more systematic engagement that is sustainable and community-based, with a regular budget to support collaboration. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations are trusted sources of information in the communities they serve, often reaching out to the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach children and families. Full engagement with religious leaders and faith-based organizations, facilitated through a governmental institutional partner, can significantly contribute to achieving equity, speed, scale and sustainability of results. The partnerships must be longstanding with local ownership to build trust, respect and shared values.
- **High level advocacy:** High-level advocacy with faith leaders can help activate a wide network for messaging on children's well-being across platforms and among key audiences, including political leadership. This can also help build a social movement for promoting positive behavioural practice and gender equality.
- **Local partnerships:** Establishing partnerships with local faith groups who work directly with communities can help build their capacity and expand their networks. The local-level engagement empowers faith-based organizations and lowers the risk of them being instrumentalized by government and international actors.

- **Outreach to remote communities** across diverse social economic groups: Faith-based organizations serve remote communities and diverse social and economic groups. This can help build a broad coalition and leverage the capacities of different faith groups and religious and tribal leaders with a sustainable network to support positive change for children.
- **Religious leadership for social and behaviour change:** Religious leaders and faith-based organizations are powerful allies for change, including in crisis contexts. With proper support and access to information, they can become effective influencers and promote efforts for child well-being and protection.

Challenges

- **Ad hoc engagement:** Sporadic, ad-hoc engagement involving religious leaders and faith groups in one-off projects and events-based advocacy without a strategy or follow-up mechanism has limited the sustainability of relationships and the continuity of impacts achieved.
- **Key messages are open to interpretation:** Advocacy messages may be misinterpreted, in particular on sensitive issues, due to the different schools of thought within the same faith. It is therefore important to work closely together with religious leaders and actors to understand how resources are utilized in disseminating messages on sensitive issues during religious practices, rituals and sermons.
- **Religious actors are not a homogenous community:** Religious actors are a diverse group and sometimes divided over critical issues, for example, with regard to child marriage. Working with different groupings within the same religion is needed to be inclusive but also requires significant human resources. Some religious leaders may consider social change introduced by secular organizations as an affront to religion and to their position within the community, resulting in reluctance to disseminate messages.

More conservative religious groups may resist changes to social norms and instead rely on existing norms related to patriarchy, to child marriage and to sexual and reproductive health. It is therefore of critical importance to understand and assess the capacity and commitment of all partners to promote shared values.

- **Partnering with United Nations**

agencies: Religious leaders and faith-based organizations may face significant challenges when working in partnership with United Nations agencies, such as complying with bureaucratic requirements and completing necessary paperwork for programme cooperation agreements. Other challenges include the difficulty faith-based organizations may encounter when faced with the perception that United Nations agencies have imposed on their independence and/or relationship with their communities.

- **Sensitive issues:** Partnerships between religious leaders and child rights advocates on sensitive topics such as sexual exploitation or child marriage require thorough knowledge of both religion and child rights to build a coalition of common values and shared goals.
- **Institutional capacity building:** Institutions with a religious mandate may not share the values, interests and priorities of development and humanitarian practitioners. United Nations agencies and NGOs engaged in social and behaviour change for children need to fully engage with faith leaders and communities, and invest in approaches, timeframes and processes that will build consensus, as well as build trust and credibility over the long term.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** The results achieved by engaging faith groups, especially in relation to behaviour change, have proved difficult to measure. A small-scale evaluation of social and behaviour change in relation to the work with religious leaders and faith-based organizations would help build an evidence base for a longer-term strategy.

- **Insecurity and political instability:** Limited access in non-government-controlled areas can limit engagement across all religious sects. For example, in Afghanistan, currently only about 3,600 mosques are registered with the government, less than 2 per cent of the total number of about 200,000 mosques. Lack of coordination and political instability continues to undermine the ability of the government to effectively engage with the religious leadership. Engagement with non-governmental entities will be the key in making a difference going forward.

Lessons learned

- While faith-based organizations have influence at all levels of engagement, including about policy, systems and institutions, it is their direct and trusted relationship with communities that provides a unique ability to reach across geographic, economic and social barriers to engage in positive social and behaviour change for children.
- Close partnerships with religious leaders are necessary to benefit from their knowledge and influence, and to engage more effectively with the communities they serve. This will help encourage and create a demand for services, as well as promoting positive social and behaviour change.
- Structured partnerships with religious leaders are needed to fully engage throughout the programme cycle, during the planning and implementation phase, as well as in participatory monitoring.
- Communication materials prepared for religious leaders should be produced and delivered in a timely manner with regular follow-up, as case definitions may be revised or change significantly during programme implementation.

- Despite the ongoing support of community volunteers, religious leaders have faced difficulties in fine-tuning the specific content of key messages in the language of their communities. Close support, refresher workshops, practical trainings and systematic follow-up can be useful in addressing this challenge.
- To avoid misinterpretations and ensure uniformity on key advocacy messages, information on sensitive issues must be specific, clear and effectively communicated through regular meetings with religious leaders.
- Religious leaders' forums and networks have proved effective as a way to involve religious communities in promoting child rights, child protection and child development, creating a link between faith-based communities and existing child protection mechanisms and structures.
- Religious leaders are highly respected in their communities and are well-positioned to speak out against child rights violations, advocating for the protection of children and the implementation of children's rights.
- Faith actors and faith communities can draw on the shared values of the CRC to advocate against inequality, discrimination, disparities and injustice.
- Religious leaders can actively promote the equal rights of girls and women throughout their life cycle and campaign against harmful practices and unequal treatment.²²

Faith actors and child rights advocates, working together, can strengthen their partnership and joint efforts through the following:

The way forward

The CRC is an important guiding reference and advocacy tool for religious leaders and faith-based communities to use in helping to build a world that is safe for children. Efforts to uphold the CRC and to achieve the SDGs by 2030 – particularly SDG target 16.2 to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against children – will require collective action.

Religious leaders and faith-based organizations can increase their effective influence in support of child rights and child well-being through the following:

- Religious leaders can incorporate the CRC and other relevant children's rights instruments into their efforts to support children and families in need, particularly in the most vulnerable communities.
- Faith-based communities can help support children's right to be heard (Article 12 of the CRC) and create safe spaces and opportunities for children's participation in faith-based communities, and more broadly.
- Systematic approach: A comprehensive systematic approach is needed to co-convene religious leaders and child rights organizations in a more effective and sustainable manner to achieve shared goals based on common core values.
- Evidence base: Religious leaders and child rights organizations can work together to strengthen the evidence base on faith and social and behaviour change, and to inform programme priorities, monitoring and evaluation and assessment of results, through joint research, case studies and other evidence generation.
- Context-specific priorities: The work with religious leaders and local faith groups should be context specific and able to respond to the needs and priorities of the community as they arise, based on evidence and informed by local conditions and experience, to address the obstacles specific to the community.
- Review existing religious teachings and faith-based resources relevant for children's well-being: Religious teachings, practices, tools and other resources present an important opportunity for mobilizing communities and promoting sustainable behaviour change, where adherence to religion is considered intrinsic to a community's identity. Working

across faith-based communities, together with civil society, NGOs and United Nations agencies in a review of faith-based resource materials, would help identify key principles and priorities for action to support the rights and well-being of children.

- Capacity development: Efforts are needed to help local faith actors expand their advocacy and programme support, and their organizational planning and budgeting – adapted to address local priorities and challenges.
- Joint advocacy: Joint advocacy on priority issues for children, based on agreed principles and actions on social and behaviour change, can help support faith actors who directly engage with families and communities, and expand their outreach to cooperate with non-faith actors and activists.
- Child and adolescent participation: The active engagement of religious leaders can reinforce the participation of adolescents and young people in violence prevention, peace and reconciliation – in both urban and rural settings.

- Resource mobilization: In order to build a systematic approach for engagement between religious leaders and faith-based groups and child rights organizations, a predictable and reliable resource base is needed, to establish a broad coalition of partners and support planning and capacity development across diverse communities.

Religion and children's rights are powerful allies with tremendous potential to strengthen families and communities and to improve the lives and well-being of children around the world. The South Asia region has an important role to play in strengthening the commitment of religious leaders, religious communities, and faith-based organizations to use their networks and influence to promote the CRC as an important guiding reference and advocacy tool to achieve positive results, notably the SDG targets for children. A full partnership that co-convenes religious leaders, faith-based organizations and child rights advocates has the potential to create a new alliance for children and their families, and for the benefit of the whole community.



ANNEX I: Country inputs

Country assessments of achievements and challenges

Afghanistan

UNICEF Afghanistan began working directly with religious leaders in 2011 in a collaboration with Islamic scholars from Al Azhar University who provided capacity building for 35 religious leaders on issues of child rights and child well-being. Those efforts led to engagement with thousands of religious leaders from all 34 provinces of Afghanistan who have participated in workshops and trainings on child rights related topics, including child protection, WASH, education, polio eradication, health and nutrition.

Areas of advocacy with religious leaders include promoting gender equality, specifically advocating for girls' education and calling for increased enrolment of girls and an end to child marriage, working in collaboration with the Ministry of Education.

Achievements

- In 2017, in follow up to the regional meeting with religious leaders, UNICEF Afghanistan initiated engagement with five of the most respected Islamic leaders on issues such as justice reform and child rights, as well as nutrition and child-focused advocacy.
- UNICEF Afghanistan, to date, has engaged approximately 10,000 religious leaders from across the country in a range of activities, including provincial-level Islamic conferences on polio eradication and immunization, as well as workshops on child protection and preventing violence against children, ending child marriage, promoting girls' education, and priorities in health, nutrition and WASH. The engagement with religious leaders has helped raise awareness and community level advocacy in support of child rights, with outreach to more than a million community members through talks given by imams during the Friday prayer and other advocacy events. In addition, each provincial directorate is a member of the Child Protection Action *Network* that is currently active in 34 provinces and 174 districts.

- A total of 500 school management *shuras* or assemblies have been convened, with at least one religious leader included in each *shura*. The school management *shuras* conduct monthly meetings, focusing on capacity building in education, child protection, WASH, health and nutrition.
- More than 3,000 religious leaders have been trained about the importance of vaccination and immunization through the Ministry of Public Health and in coordination with the Ministry of Religious Affairs.
- A total of 460 religious leaders have directly benefited from trainings in polio immunization and a further 5,000 have benefited indirectly. This has included participation in eight provincial level Islamic conferences with over 700 religious scholars and eight mobile teams of religious scholars working full time in support of polio immunization, as well as media debates on radio and television. Furthermore, three religious scholars from the National Islamic Advisory Group are actively supporting polio eradication and immunization. A cross-regional conference of religious scholars, convened in April 2019, brought together 22 scholars from Afghanistan and 22 scholars from Pakistan to discuss effective strategies to support polio immunization and eradication.
- Advocacy with religious leaders includes a broad spectrum of issues, including the protection of children from violence, preventing attacks on schools and promoting schools as safe spaces, support for breastfeeding, legislative reform in support of child rights, including specifically child rights law, marriage law and family law, and gender equality. The updated strategy for engaging religious leaders includes a focus on crosscutting programmes, gender equality and C4D.

Challenges

- **Insecurity:** Limited access in non-government-controlled areas is an obstacle in engagement across all religious denominations. Currently only about 3,600 mosques are registered with the government, less than 2 per cent of the total number of about 200,000 mosques. Engagement with non-governmental entities will be the key in making a difference going forward.
- **Political instability:** The lack of coordination and political instability continues to undermine the ability of the government to effectively engage with the religious leadership. In addition, the government has awarded several religious leaders with political appointments which affects the perceived neutrality of religious leaders and their impact at the community level.
- **Coordinated engagement:** An integrated and coordinated approach is needed to expand the national and local level engagement with religious leaders across all programme sectors.

Recommendations going forward

- Establish regular engagement with religious leaders to leverage their influence at the community level in advocating for children's rights and well-being.
- Shift from ad hoc engagement with religious leaders to a systematic engagement that is community based and sustainable, with a regular budget to support collaboration.

Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, religious leaders have considerable influence on households and communities. UNICEF and the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh (IFB) in the Ministry of Religious Affairs have a long-standing partnership that includes work with Islamic leaders to promote measles campaigns, mobilizing imams to disseminate messages for children and their families, and for the promotion of child rights at national and local levels, as well as to promote safe water and improved sanitation.

UNICEF and IFB have identified 15 priority areas for religious leaders to promote positive social and behaviour change, including a focus on adolescents to end child marriage, and improve school enrolment and retention; social and behaviour change in relation to drug abuse, gender equity and positive WASH behaviours; maternal and child health, including safe pregnancy, exclusive breastfeeding and early childhood care; child protection and prevention of violence; birth registration; and to address stigma and discrimination related to children with disabilities.

Achievements

- Strengthening of curriculum and learning materials includes the 'Imam Package for Community Engagement' currently under review by a team of Islamic scholars affiliated with the Imam Training Academy. The training package introduces messaging on the 15 priority behaviours for child well-being, including a training of trainers (TOT) module, guidelines and media related tools, as well as a pre-primary education manual. Roll-out and capacity building are planned to engage 10,000 imams across eight districts.
- Capacity-building of imams and female mosque-based pre-primary education teachers focuses on interpersonal communication and curriculum review, as well as a child rights training module, an orientation package of activities and a schedule for roll-out. A total of 400 imams and 200 female teachers have participated in the TOT, and subsequently conducted trainings for 2,000 imams and 1,600 female teachers. An additional 180 imams received media training with the support of the Ministry of Information. Imams and female teachers are subsequently mobilizing communities on positive social practices.
- The partnership with IFB is also building the capacity and skills of imams and female teachers on community engagement, interpersonal communication, child rights, and social and behaviour change for children. Analysis has demonstrated that, while formal religious structures prioritise male leadership, informal leadership positions are often held by women, such as female teachers in madrassas. It is beneficial to engage both male and female formal and informal leaders, thereby generating diversity of age and gender in outreach to communities.
- Community mobilization on health and well-being practices includes a mass education programme, working with IFB to build capacities for community engagement, dialogue and dissemination of messages on child survival, health and nutrition, early childhood development, education and child protection – specifically ending corporal punishment and child marriage. In addition, khutba guidelines aligned with the Quran and Hadiths have been developed for inclusion in the weekly Jummah prayer, and an entertainment-education package for mosque-based pre-primary classes is being implemented in 6,000 mosques reaching 180,000 children under 6 years.

- Efforts are underway to build an evidence base to inform programme monitoring through joint research and documentation of best practices, as well as a partnership with Al-Azhar University to publish related studies on child rights, and a Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices, and Behaviours study on the 15 key household behaviours and social and behaviour change for children.
- Nearly 5,000 imams and religious leaders in the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar are mobilized and engaged in promoting campaigns for diphtheria vaccination, cholera vaccination, measles vaccination and two rounds of Nutrition Week, contributing to the high level of outreach and coverage. An advocacy workshop convened in the host and Rohingya communities brought together 100 religious leaders to build social cohesion and promote positive social behaviours.

Challenges

- **Child marriage:** The strength of the partnership between UNICEF and IFB was demonstrated in 2019 when a fundamentalist group demanded all United Nations agencies and NGOs stop their work to end child marriage. IFB took action and was able to quickly resolve the situation by issuing a press release stating that the organization did not have any ties with the ruling party and that legal action would be taken to enable the work of the United Nations and NGOs to go forward.
- **Institutional capacity building:** Institutions with a religious mandate may not share the values, interests and priorities of development and humanitarian practitioners. United Nations agencies and NGOs engaged in social and behaviour change for children need to fully engage with faith leaders and communities, and invest in approaches, timeframes and processes that will build consensus around shared values and mutual goals, as well as building trust and credibility over the long term.

Recommendations going forward

- Engage systematically with religious leaders as full and vital partners in efforts to achieve the SDGs. Faith leaders and actors are trusted sources of information and can reach out to the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach children and families. Full engagement with religious leaders and faith-based organizations, facilitated through a governmental institutional partner, can significantly contribute to achieving equity, speed, scale, and sustainability of results. The partnerships must be sustainable with local ownership to build trust, respect and shared values.

Bhutan

Monastic education is the oldest system of learning in Bhutan, with Buddhism at the heart of its culture and traditions. In practice, families send a child to one of Bhutan's many monasteries to acquire literacy and scholarship in religious scriptures and practices. Although this tradition continues, it is no longer as strong as in the past. A WASH baseline survey in 2019 found that close to 6,000 children are living in over 220 monastic schools and 28 nunneries across the country. UNICEF works with the Central Monastic Body and the Bhutan Nuns Foundation to support child well-being in the areas of WASH, education, child protection and behaviour change.

The Religion and Health Project, initiated in 1989, led to a partnership between the Central Monastic Body and the Ministry of Health, with technical and financial assistance from UNICEF and partners. As a result, the Central Monastic Body has made tremendous progress in improving the health and well-being of children living in the monastic institutions in the last 10 years. Because the Central Monastic Body functions independently, advocacy related to child rights and child protection needs to be sensitive to the local framework. Recognizing this, UNICEF is working in a holistic manner to introduce programmes in nutrition and WASH, as well as behaviour change communication.

Achievements

- More than 30 head monks and nuns in all 20 districts were sensitized to discuss and promote recommended family practices on child health and nutrition, including care during pregnancy, full immunization, child nutrition and exclusive breast feeding, and complementary feeding and hand washing.
- Support for young monks and nuns to learn basic English and mathematics is also underway, enhancing literacy and numeracy. In addition, more than 100 instructors from 61 monastic schools and 28 nunneries have been trained in teaching English literacy and numeracy.
- Monastic institutions receive support to improve the health and well-being of monks and nuns through the S4D programme. This provides literacy skills and health-related services for all children and youth in Bhutan, including those in nunneries and monastic institutions. The curriculum will be endorsed by the monastic body for use in monastic institutions to promote physical education, health and well-being.
- UNICEF supported the Bhutan Nuns Foundation in training nuns on basic safety during and after disaster as well as on education in emergencies. The nuns were equipped on fire safety, how to manage earthquake-related disasters and basic first aid.
- UNICEF is working closely with government and civil society partners to introduce a standardized curriculum for capacity development of children and adolescents on child protection and the prevention of violence against children. As a result, five organizations, including the Central Monastic Body, now use a standardized training package for adolescents on preventing, recognizing and reporting violence against children. Since it was introduced in 2017, more than 4,500 young monks and nuns have been trained to protect themselves from violence and exploitation. UNICEF is supporting the roll-out of the training and plans to cover all the monastic institutions and nunneries by 2022.
- Steps and interventions have been established for the Council of Religious Affairs (*Dratshang Lhengtshog*) to roll out, by 2022, a strategy, plan of action and standard operating procedure (SOP) on child protection for children in monastic institutions and nunneries developed with support from UNICEF.
- Since 2018, more than 100 teachers from various monastic schools and nunneries have been trained in basic skills to recognize signs of vulnerabilities and to provide appropriate support to children in need.
- In partnership with the Central Monastic Body and the National Commission for Women and Children, UNICEF developed the Child Mandala to promote child rights and well-being as a holistic approach.
- To expand equitable access and use of WASH services, three monastic institutions, housing 173 child monks and nuns, have been provided with toilets, as well as safe drinking water, handwashing facilities and water heating systems. Furthermore, 1,410 monks in 26 monastic institutions in three districts (Paro, Punakha and Thimphu) now have access to safe sanitation through safe toilets (SaTo) technology. Additionally, 30 monks from those institutions were trained to install SaTo toilets.
- Global Handwashing Day was observed in six monastic schools in Samtse district, led by head monks of those institutions and engaging 223 monks overall. To improve menstrual hygiene practices in nunneries, the 'Red Dot Campaign' was launched on Menstrual Hygiene Management Day to promote hygienic use and disposal of sanitary pads, with distribution of sanitary pads to 17 nunneries across the country.
- To improve personal hygiene of 1,924 child monks and nuns in the remote eastern region, water heating geysers, water filters and hair clippers were supplied to 46 monastic schools and nunneries. A one-day workshop to empower and promote safe WASH services was conducted across 23 monasteries and two nunneries in Western Bhutan, engaging 80 nuns and 1,175 monks.

Challenges

- The focus of education in monastic schools is on learning religious scriptures which does not prepare young monks and nuns to fully participate in the activities of modern life and global development. Among the 400 monastic schools and nunneries, only 75 have recently started classes in functional English literacy and numeracy. UNICEF is working together with the authorities to help address these issues through capacity development and advocating for permanent contracts for teachers in monastic institutions.
- Most of the children enrolled in monastic institutions and nunneries enter at a young age, living apart from their families. The risks associated with family separation include the possibility of various types of abuse, neglect and violence associated with institutional care.
- Monastic education emphasizes a total immersion into spiritual life and strict discipline. As a result, child monks and nuns may be scolded or struck for failing to follow the daily routine. The use of corporal punishment is generally accepted as a form of corrective discipline.
- The poor sanitation facilities, inadequate water supply and hygiene practices are an issue of concern in monastic schools and nunneries. The lack of water and clean toilets were frequently cited as the reason for missing school lessons and other activities according to the WASH baseline study conducted in monastic schools and nunneries in 2019.

Recommendations going forward

- Religious leaders and faith-based organizations can play a larger role in the dissemination of health and nutrition information.
- WASH or health coordinators should be in place in all monastic schools and nunneries by 2023 to promote quality sustainable WASH services. UNICEF is the primary partner working in areas of WASH in monastic institutions and it is therefore important to continue support in the construction of WASH facilities.
- The curriculum for sports and physical education or 'movement education' will be presented for endorsement by the highest monastic body. Once endorsed as the curriculum, it will be piloted in select monastic institutions and then scaled up across the monastic system. Sports and physical education equipment will be supplied to those institutions and instructors will be trained to promote sports and physical education or movement education in monastic institutions.
- Religious persons and faith-based organizations are able to influence positive social and behaviour change for child rights. It is therefore important to engage more effectively in promoting child rights.
- Efforts are needed to further strengthen engagement with leaders of other religions in Bhutan.

India

Religious leaders and faith-based communities are integrated into the cultural and social fabric of India. Faith-based communities can contribute social, spiritual and material assets in partnership with child rights organizations, both to enhance programme objectives and to address the needs of the most vulnerable children and families. Engaging with faith-based organizations and leaders is an effective means of outreach to remote and rural areas, building relationships across diverse social and economic groups.

Areas of priority for advocacy and engagement with religious leaders and groups include child protection issues such as the prevention of violence, gender equality and ending child marriage, and health issues including breastfeeding and menstrual hygiene, as well as WASH.

Achievements

- The Government of India has leveraged UNICEF's convening power to engage faith leadership in regions with low development indicators. In 2019, advocacy and capacity building with faith leaders helped promote positive behaviours affecting child care and child development across seven states with a specific focus on immunization, alternative care, early and exclusive breastfeeding, sanitation and hygiene, ending child marriage and prevention of teenage pregnancy.
- UNICEF works with the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA) in India, engaging leaders across all major religions and faiths. The initial exclusive focus was on WASH messaging and has since been expanded to include messaging on gender equality and disaster risk reduction. A recent GIWA publication, 'WASH in Faith', focuses on the importance various religions place on WASH behaviours, in close collaboration with UNICEF. Collaboration with GIWA includes the following highlights:
 - The Worship for WASH Summit in 2014 in Rishikesh was attended by 200 faith leaders. Collaboration with GIWA in 2015 and 2016 promoted positive hygiene and sanitation at numerous events such as the Ganga Sagar Mela and Kumbha Mela, as well as a roundtable meeting and a summit gathering faith leaders to improve hygiene and sanitation practices and end open defecation.
 - In 2019, GIWA marked the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Gandhi Jayanti by supporting WASH messaging and raising awareness among faith leaders, including women and tribal minorities attending Kumbh Mela 2019. Additional issues in the advocacy outreach at the Mela included child protection and women's empowerment.
 - The campaign 'Siksha se Swabhiman' ('yes to education, no to child marriage') was also launched at the Kumbh Mela in 2019, in partnership with GIWA. The campaign focused on raising awareness to empower adolescents, especially girls, and engaged parents and decision makers to overcome negative social norms that favour child marriage – especially for girls.
 - Engagement with religious leaders, especially Muslim leaders in marginalized communities, has helped build support for immunization and polio eradication. Religious leaders have come together to support the campaign and urged parents to immunize their children. The Social Mobilization Network includes more than 8,000 communities and engages those mobilizing in household outreach, helping to overcome resistance to immunization and identifying high-risk, hard-to-reach children.

- Technical Support was provided to the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog) and the Piramal Foundation in 25 districts across seven states (Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) to engage faith leaders in support of improved health and nutrition indicators. Collaboration with faith leaders as influencers and advocates in communities has helped initiate social and behaviour change, though gaps remain in changing social norms concerning child marriage and teenage pregnancy. In 2019, UNICEF and the Piramal Foundation, together with NITI Aayog, organized capacity building for 150 faith leaders in Bihar, Assam and Uttar Pradesh. They will serve as master trainers to raise awareness through district and block level cascade trainings.
- Advocacy with faith leaders has leveraged two broad levels of engagement: leader to leader and leader to congregation. Areas of focus for messaging include safe sanitation, including on culturally sensitive issues such as menstrual hygiene. In 2019, female faith leaders with outreach that numbers in the millions, came together to end child marriage in communities across India.

Challenges

- **Ad hoc engagement:** Sporadic, ad-hoc engagement involving religious leaders and faith groups in once-off projects and events-based advocacy without a strategy or follow-up mechanism has limited the sustainability of relationships and the continuity of impacts achieved.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** The results achieved by engaging faith groups, especially in relation to behaviour change, have proved difficult to measure. A small-scale evaluation of social and behaviour change in relation to the work with religious leaders and faith-based organizations would help build an evidence-base for a longer-term strategy.

- **Partnering:** Establishing and sustaining partnerships across diverse religious and faith groups requires a considerable investment in building capacity and engaging in short and long-term advocacy.

Recommendations going forward

- Expand collaboration with faith-based organizations to reach remote communities and impact diverse social and economic groups.
- Engage in high-level advocacy with faith leaders to activate a wide network for messaging across platforms and among key audiences, including political leadership. This can also help build a social movement for positive behavioural practice, promoting gender equality and improving health and sanitation indicators.
- Leverage the diverse capacities of different faith groups and religious and tribal leaders, building a continuous and sustainable network to support positive change for children.

Maldives

In the Maldives, Islam has significant influence in supporting children's well-being in their families, societies and communities. The government, in collaboration with religious scholars, organizes annual seminars, workshops and symposiums to raise awareness about children's issues for parents, guardians, teachers and children themselves.

Achievements

- The vaccination campaign in the Maldives included engagement with religious leaders to promote vaccination, including a video featuring religious leadership in support of immunization to mark World Immunization Week 2019.

Recommendations going forward

- Further engagement with religious leaders is planned as part of the advocacy efforts to end child marriage.

Nepal

Religious leaders in Nepal are well positioned to raise awareness in their communities about the harmful impact of violence on children and to advocate for positive norms, attitudes and practices to prevent violence against children in homes, schools, institutions and communities. Interfaith efforts are also important to create synergies and contribute to religious and social harmony and mutual trust among the different faiths. These efforts have been supported by the National Inter-Religious Network (NIRN) that represents leaders from all major religious groups in Nepal, including Baha'i, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism and Islam. Together, with UNICEF, the NIRN has advocated to end child marriage and all forms of violence against women and children. The combined efforts of religious leaders, working in partnership with UNICEF, are aimed at ending child marriage, as well as *chaupadi* (the practice which requires girls and women to live outside their homes during menstruation).

Achievements

- The ongoing partnership with NIRN to end child marriage brings together religious leaders from Hindu, Christian, Islamic, Baha'i and Buddhist faiths. The partnership developed a training manual focusing on positive practices associated with gender, child rights and marriage laws. More than 200 interfaith leaders were sensitized and have continued to participate in advocacy and public events promoting an end to child marriage.

Challenges

- Nearly 85 per cent of the population in Nepal is Hindu. The numerous denominations and diverse geographic and ethnic identities have differing positions regarding child marriage. More outreach and networking needs to be done to bring the many leaders and groups together in support of a common position to end child marriage.
- More evidence is needed to highlight the importance of religion and religious practices with regard to positive social and behaviour change in Nepal.
- The Hindu Kingdom of Nepal became a secular country in 2015, following the end of the civil conflict. Hindu religious leaders have continued to engage politically in support of diverse political agendas.
- While there has been significant support to end child marriage, there is reluctance among some religious leaders, of both Hindu and Islamic faith, to denounce child marriage publicly; for example, during Friday prayers and during various festivals.
- The caste system remains a major driver of social exclusion in Nepal despite being officially outlawed. Engaging religious leaders in leading a dialogue on the caste system would provide an opportunity to promote social change and inclusion.

Recommendations going forward

- The Nepal country office is partnering with child rights organizations and Hindu leaders to analyse major Hindu scriptures from a child rights perspective. Based on the analysis, UNICEF will work with the Sanskrit University in Nepal to advocate against harmful practices at various religious functions, as well as at household level.
- Further engagement with religious leaders and faith-based groups is planned to address sanitation, in particular menstrual hygiene linked with *chaupadi* (the practice which requires girls and women to live outside their homes during menstruation), focusing on the use of modern sanitation practices that enable women and girls to reconcile privacy, hygiene and the practice of religious rites.
- Among the more than 500 institutional care institutions present in Nepal, many are linked to Hindu and Buddhist practices that support the free religious education of young children in preparation for a monastic life. Engagement with religious leaders is needed to address concerns regarding the child care provided by monastic institutions, including for children from disadvantaged families.
- The recent Child Rights Act outlawing corporal punishment presents an opportunity to engage religious leaders in promoting alternative disciplines and ending corporal punishment.

Pakistan

Religious leaders are key influencers in Pakistan and engagement with religious leaders is a crucial component of community engagement, specifically outreach to men. UNICEF works with religious leaders from different denominations across almost all programme priorities, including child survival, and development and protection, and is planning to engage religious leaders on issues related to early childhood development in 2020, particularly in the promotion of positive parenting through roll out of an integrated parenting package.

The polio programme in Pakistan is threatened by an anti-vaccination campaign. In that context religious leaders are the most credible and influential partners for disseminating information to support immunization. In addition, religious organizations have the largest network and presence across the country, including in the most remote, marginalized and at-risk communities.

Achievements

- Partnership with National Islamic Advisory Group and provincial scholars' taskforces bringing together renowned and influential religious leaders to support efforts to eradicate polio.
- Social mobilization and community engagement through a cadre of Religious Support Persons, identified from every denomination, have contributed to polio and other immunization campaigns, particularly to address vaccination refusal in certain areas. This includes mosque announcements and dissemination of key messages on social media.

04. Country inputs

- Under MHM, UNICEF and the Council of Islamic Ideology organized a consultative meeting with more than 300 scholars from different denominations. The main agenda was to deliberate with religious leaders across the country on how to dispel misconceptions and promote positive societal change on menstrual hygiene. Through this engagement Pakistan's Council of Islamic Ideology has published review papers on the subject and written over a dozen articles published in mainstream media. It has also created a platform for both male and female adolescents to openly and confidently seek clarity regarding religious perspectives on the topic, including during the launch of UNICEF's MHM campaign 'NoChutti' where over 300 boys and girls participated, with tens of thousands of others following the proceedings via social media. The meeting came up with a dissemination plan ready to be executed in 2020. Videos on commitments made during the meeting are available through the following link: <https://www.yammer.com/unicef.org/threads/149880490418176>
- Orientation on HIV was conducted for 100 religious leaders in Ratodero, Larkana District, in order to engage the religious leaders in community mobilization.
- Mobilization is underway with religious leaders to secure their support for promoting birth registration services and including key messages for nikah (marriage) registrars. Nikah registrars are predominantly under the management of religious clerics.
- Mosque announcements and community mobilization of religious leaders has been prioritized during school enrolment drives and, in the Punjab Province, religious leaders are actively engaged in policy discussions on nutrition.
- Religious leaders are the key influencers in communities for nutrition services. In the Community Management of Acute Malnutrition programme implementation, through community mapping, local religious leaders, including imams and muezzins, are identified and engaged in community outreach and nutrition communication efforts, including in community dialogues.

Challenges

- **Sensitive issues:** Engaging religious leaders in sensitive topics such as sexual and reproductive health or child marriage requires thorough knowledge of both religious and child rights to present the case in a respectful and convincing manner.
- **Inclusivity:** Working across the different denominations within the same religion, in order to be inclusive of all of them at all times, requires significant human resources.

Recommendations going forward

- Work more closely with religious leaders to benefit from their knowledge and influence, and to engage more effectively with the communities they serve. This will help encourage and create a demand for services, as well as promoting positive social and behaviour change.
- Build structured partnerships with religious leaders to engage them throughout the programme cycle, in the planning and implementing phase, as well as in participatory monitoring.

Sri Lanka

UNICEF Sri Lanka has established a close network with religious leaders and conducted various capacity building measures, engaging religious leaders in violence prevention and gaining their support to advance child rights. Religious leaders' forums and networks have proved effective to involve religious communities in promoting child rights, child protection and child development, creating a link between faith-based communities and existing child protection mechanisms and structures. Notably, the pro-active engagement of religious leaders has reinforced the participation of adolescents and young people in violence prevention, peace and reconciliation – in both urban and rural settings.

Engagement of high-level religious leaders has also proved important for building support and informing discussion and decisions that affect the respective faith-based communities. This includes promoting family-based care and an appropriate system for alternative care at both national and community levels, and in promoting child participation and empowerment through religious networks.

Achievements

- **Roundtable discussions with religious leaders on nurturing values and spirituality in early childhood for the prevention of violence:**
 - The International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality organized three national-level roundtable discussions aiming to increase awareness, among religious communities and their networks in areas of preventing violence against children in early childhood. The discussions engaged different stakeholders in strengthening norms and values that support non-violent, respectful, gender-equitable relations and contribute to reducing parenting practices that violate the dignity of the child. UNICEF engaged in all the roundtable discussions and highlighted the significant role of religious leaders in preventing childhood violence.
- A booklet was produced as an outcome of the roundtable discussions to raise awareness about the importance of children's well-being in early childhood, and the support needed from parents, caregivers, educators and the community to provide nurturing care. The booklet is based on the reflections of local religious leaders and other stakeholders and aspires to challenge social and cultural norms that condone violence in early childhood. It also reflects on the impact of violence on children, inspiring change at home, school, religious places of worship, and in the community.
- **South Asia Religious Leaders Platform for Children:**
 - UNICEF Sri Lanka supported the participation of five religious leaders in the South Asia Religious Leaders Platform in September 2017 and conducted follow-up meetings on the following action points: i) using religious networks to promote child rights in Sri Lanka; ii) raising the awareness of religious communities on the principles of child rights and building capacity to end and prevent violence against children through regular information sharing on religious communication channels; and iii) establishing and strengthening the multi-ethnic religious network in promoting child rights and social harmony in Sri Lanka.
- **Back-to-School campaign:**
 - The Easter Sunday terrorist attacks caused tragic death and injury. The attacks also led to repeated curfews and incidents of mob violence. Several schools were closed in the weeks following the attacks. While some schools resumed classes by the second week of June, attendance was low due to prevailing concerns for the safety and security of children.

- Recognizing the critical need to act to help resolve tension and to reinforce a sense of normalcy, UNICEF launched a communications campaign targeting parents, teachers, religious leaders and decision makers, to encourage children to go back to school and begin learning. The three-week campaign was launched on traditional and social media channels. In addition to media, UNICEF senior management advocated with high-level religious leaders to get their support for increased school attendance. The campaign resulted in a significant increase in school attendance, from 40 per cent to nearly 100 per cent.
- **Support was provided to the Eastern Provincial Council of Sri Lanka to create awareness among the public, including religious leaders, on the preparation of a citizen's budget to improve budget transparency:**
 - Awareness raising on the citizen's budget provided an opportunity to for the active participation of religious leaders from among the four major religions in Sri Lanka – Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism – to provide constructive feedback and suggestions on the utilization of public money – encouraging transparency and accountability for the benefit of children and families.
- **Restoring community-level mechanisms for the safety and protection of women, and boys and girls, particularly for victims or those at risk of abuse, neglect and exploitation:**
 - UNICEF supported the establishment of a women and children's desk in the Sampoor Police station in Trincomalee District, working closely with religious communities and faith-based organizations. Links were established at the divisional level with the women and children's desk and the Village Child Development Committee (VCDC), as well as the Religious Leader's Forum to promote children's rights and community education on violence against children. This led to a significant improvement in violence prevention and child protection response.
- **Strengthening child-centred disaster risk reduction and emergency preparedness in Sri Lanka:**
 - Climate change is one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century and Sri Lanka is on the frontlines. Children suffer the most from the direct physical impact of extreme weather, directly impacting their education and increasing psychological stress.
 - UNICEF is building emergency preparedness capacity in disaster-prone areas of Batticaloa District by adopting a child-centred disaster risk reduction approach. One of the key target groups for training on the approach and emergency response is religious leaders. This has led to greater involvement of children, families and community members in disaster preparedness and climate change adaptation.

Challenges

- Reconciliation: Fostering harmony and reconciliation among different religious leaders is challenging in the aftermath of the nearly 30-year civil war and continuing political instability. The post-conflict period has not brought enough opportunities to address the underlying issues that contributed to the conflict – linked to inequality and marginalization – as well as the lack of political representation among some communities and unequal access to economic opportunities and to justice.
- Religious and ethnic divisions: The Easter Sunday attack, in April 2019, further divided religious and ethnic groups and increased tension among religious leaders.
- Recommendations going forward
- Identify and consolidate diverse religious values and practices that promote child rights, social harmony, child protection and violence prevention.
- Build the capacity of religious communities to support child rights principles, child protection and child development.
- Systematically involve religious leaders in child development programmes and establish linkages between religious networks and child protection networks.
- Create an accountability mechanism among religious leaders to sustain peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka and encourage leaders from all religions to play a key role in child protection and child development.
- Create a strong network among the four major religious groups in Sri Lanka with a focus on children's well-being and the promotion of child rights.

Endnotes

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**United Nations Children's Fund
Regional Office for South Asia**

P.O. Box 5815
Lekhnath Marg,
Kathmandu, Nepal

Tel: +977 1-4417082

E-mail: rosa@unicef.org

Websites:

www.unicef.org/rosa
www.facebook.com/unicefsouthasia
www.twitter.com/unicefrosa
www.instagram.com/unicefsouthasia

