

# FAITH AND POSITIVE CHANGE FOR CHILDREN

GLOBAL INITIATIVE ON  
SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

*Information Brief*



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© UNICEF/UN077138/Izhiman: Palestine (State of), 2017. Amal Abu Nimer, 18, stands outside the Dome of the Rock during a visit to Jerusalem

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## WHAT IS THE FAITH AND POSITIVE CHANGE FOR CHILDREN GLOBAL INITIATIVE?

Engaging individuals and communities to influence positive behavioural and social change is central to realizing children's rights. Whether addressing the challenge of high rates of neonatal mortality; malnutrition; children not attending or dropping out of school; tackling violence against children; eliminating harmful social norms such as child marriage or female genital cutting; eliminating open defecation; addressing conflict and migration; ensuring social inclusion of children with disabilities; surviving natural disasters; supporting environmental protection or ensuring adolescent wellbeing, the underlying reasons for the challenges that undermine children's wellbeing, in most cases, have a critical element of social and behavioural change.

One of the most powerful influencers of individual behaviours, social norms and collective action at community and societal level is religion. Religion has a profound impact on personal and collective values and social norms and as such can be a powerful catalyst for positive action to improve the lives of women and children. In situations of conflict, unrest and humanitarian crisis, religious leaders and faith actors are also singularly best positioned to foster inter-faith dialogue, diffuse tensions and discriminatory attitudes and provide spiritual and psychological support in the face of adversity. Conversely faith-based leaders/actors can be a source of detrimental influence which perpetuates harmful traditional practices, gender inequity and restricted access or resistance to life saving and health promoting behaviours, products and services.

UNICEF has a long history of active engagement with local faith actors as civil society partners for the wellbeing of children. A 2014 global mapping of the organization's engagement with religious communities, however, showed that while 150 of UNICEF's country offices across the world were engaging in one way or other with Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs), the partnerships for the most part were comprised of ad-hoc, activity-level and short-lived initiatives versus more overarching cross-sectoral efforts tied to country programme priorities. Also, while sensitization, social mobilization and advocacy activities have accounted for two thirds of country-level FBO-related engagement, these have largely been characterized by message-based approaches, instrumentalist in nature and lacking evidence to address the complexity of social and behaviour change issues.

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*The Faith and Positive Change for Children Global Initiative aims to move beyond single sector, single denomination and message-based communication to support more focused, systematic and at-scale engagement with faith-based communities and actors to influence positive social and behaviour change.*

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To address these challenges and maximize opportunities for more positive and impactful influence towards improving child and family wellbeing, UNICEF (Communication for Development Section and Civil Society Partnerships Unit in NYHQ), the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities and Religions for Peace in 2018 embarked on a new global Initiative on *Faith and Positive Change for Children*.

### Aim of the Initiative

The purpose of the global Initiative is to move beyond single sector, single denomination and message-based communication to support more *focused, systematic and at-scale engagement with faith-based communities and actors to influence positive social and behaviour change* towards improving the wellbeing of children, youth, women and families, particularly the most marginalized.

### Key Partners

The Initiative brings together diverse partners from around the world including religious leaders, faith actors, government representatives, development partners and academics. The key partners include:

- **Technical and Global Lead on Children's Issues and Social and Behaviour Change:** UNICEF.
- **Interfaith Convening and Implementing Partner:** Religions for Peace (RfP), the largest and most representative multi-religious coalition in the world ([www.rfp.org](http://www.rfp.org)).
- **Knowledge Partner on Faith initiatives:** Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI), an international multi-sector collaboration for evidence on faith actors' development activities ([www.jliflc.com](http://www.jliflc.com)).
- **Capacity Development Partner on Religious Literacy:** Harvard Divinity School, a nonsectarian school of religious studies working to advance understanding of religion through their Religious Literacy Project ([www.rlp.hds.harvard.edu](http://www.rlp.hds.harvard.edu)).
- **Funding Partners:** The Initiative's initial endeavors have been seed funded with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Rissho Kosei-Kai, a worldwide Buddhist organization.

## KEY STRATEGIES

The following strategies underpin the Initiative's efforts:

- Strengthening of the global evidence base on faith and social and behaviour change.
- Review and consolidation of existing faith-based resource materials.
- Development of a compendium of country case studies on faith and social and behaviour change.
- Development of a co-created Theory of Change and programming guidance on faith and social and behaviour change.
- Capacity Development of local faith actors for country level roll-out of the Initiative.
- Advocacy for implementation of agreed principles and actions on faith and social and behaviour change.
- Expanded partnerships for scaling up and quality assurance for the Initiative.

### Focus on evidence generation

In July 2018, the *Faith and Positive Change for Children* Initiative was launched at a global gathering in Bangkok, bringing together 100 participants from 20 countries, including UNICEF staff, 5 RfP's Inter-Religious Councils, faith actors from multiple traditions, and national government representatives. A statement was issued, underlining the commitment of all participants to the new Initiative and outlining the key principles upon which it is founded.

Since July 2018, the Initiative has produced several joint outputs of strategic work, including:

- Strengthening the global evidence base on faith and social and behavior change through a global **literature and evidence review**. This review consolidated evidence and experiences from over 100 sources.
- **Mapping technical standards and guidelines** (including a review of 26 individual toolkits) currently being used by UNICEF and other organizations in social and behavioral change work with faith-based organizations.
- Documenting **case studies of UNICEF-faith actor collaboration in 17 countries** through interviews with partners including faith-based universities, FBOs and national governments.
- Co-creating a **Theory of Change** based on UNICEF's Global Theory of Change for Social and Behavior Change, the evidence reviews, case studies and inputs from JLI's global faith actor and academic partners.
- Forming an **Advisory Group of 20 partner organizations**: Adventist Development and Relief Agency, American Jewish World Service, Anglican Alliance, Arigatou International, Episcopal Relief and Development, Harvard Divinity School, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, International Interfaith Peace Corps, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Mothers Union, Oxfam, Queen Margaret University, Religions for Peace, Salvation Army, Sarvodaya, Tearfund, University of Cape Town, University of Leeds, World Council of Churches, and World Vision International. This group will provide critical assessment, add insights for the regional and country level roll-out of the Initiative, and help to share the learnings from the Initiative through their networks.
- Creating a public **web platform** to share information and resources generated by the Initiative ([www.faith4sbcc.org](http://www.faith4sbcc.org)).

## What next?

Building on the substantive achievements and strategic partnerships developed in 2018, the Initiative's initial Theory of Change, draft program guidance, and package of resources is being field tested, validated and applied in 6 focal countries in Sub-Saharan Africa during 2019. This will be undertaken through country level workshops, to be anchored in understanding local contexts and in knowledge exchange, with a strong action research and learning agenda. Participants will include UNICEF Country Offices, RfP Inter-Religious Councils, local faith actors, local NGOs, and government representatives.

Based on the learning from participatory workshops, a series of guidance documents, tools and resources will be developed to support increased faith engagement by UNICEF country offices and more effective social and behavioral change by local faith actors. While for primary use by UNICEF, the documents will be made available for use by other development and faith-based organizations.

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*“We note that the launch of this Initiative marks a historic milestone in paving the way for a new era of more systematic and strategic faith actor engagement focused on social and behavior change communications for the benefit of children, families and communities.”*

*Workshop Statement, Global Evidence Review and Regional and Country Planning Workshop, Bangkok, 10-12 July 2018.*

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© UNICEF/Choniakan Worrakhunwisam: Workshop picture (for consistency): Thailand, 10-12 July 2018: Global Evidence Review and Regional and Country Planning Workshop in Bangkok.

## LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR

After the first year of intensive evidence gathering, a few key lessons are guiding the Initiative. It matters *who* is included and *how* people are included in faith and social and behavior change partnerships.

### Who is included

- **Working across levels:** Potential partners include those across diverse faiths and many levels of religious hierarchies, at local, national, and international levels. There is a need to move beyond majority focus on religious leaders to work with other formal and informal leaders within the broader faith community (including women and youth leadership).
- **Engaging traditional networks:** Broad participation must look to faith actors outside of the most prominent groups including traditional networks that are constituted by spiritual leadership, clan networks, tribal councils, and elders that have strong influence on norms and practices within local communities.

### How they are included

- **Working on equitable partnerships:** Instrumentalization of faith actors for short-term goals does not achieve sustainable change. Instead, a contextual understanding of faith actors' dynamics and openness to participatory and co-creative planning with faith partners allows for capacity sharing with development partners.
- **Research and evidence:** Participatory research processes are needed to fill the research and evidence gaps in faith for social and behavioral change. These gaps include limited or inaccessible formative research to better understand the complex influences of religion in communities and mapping exercises to identify appropriate faith actors. There are also challenges of collecting monitoring data with faith actors, and a lack of evidence of impact from multi-sited research projects with counterfactuals.
- **Programmatic approach – Heart and Mind Dialogue:** It is not enough to present technical training alone, scriptural reflection alone, or even a mix of these two. Instead, a “heart and mind” approach should include space for communication of technical information, analysis of teachings from the faith tradition(s), as well as safe spaces for personal connection to these topics through reflection from participants on daily cultural, social, economic, and political realities.
- **Advocacy work:** Policy and advocacy level work with faith actors is a critical level to consider. From family and community to national and international level, faith actors' advocacy efforts benefit from intra- and inter-faith cooperation and collaboration with non-faith actors, including activist groups and development actors.



© UNICEF/UNI45467/Pirozzi: Philippines, 2006. Holding hands, to symbolize the power of partnership.

*This is a joint JLI, RfP and UNICEF Brief prepared by Dr. Olivia Wilkinson (JLI Director of Research); Susanna Trotta (JLI Research Adviser); Dr. Kerida McDonald (Senior Advisor, Communication for Development UNICEF NYHQ) and Caterina Tino (Communication Specialist, Civil Society Partnerships UNICEF NYHQ). Special thanks to Deepika Singh (Religions for Peace, Director of Programs), Jean Duff (JLI Chief Executive) and Stacy Nam (JLI Senior Programs and Knowledge Manager) for their review, inputs and support. August 2019.*

*For more information on the Faith and Change for Children global Initiative, please visit [www.faith4sbcc.org](http://www.faith4sbcc.org).*

