CHILD RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Powerful Partnerships for Children[1]

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> The instinct to care for children comes from deep within the teachings and spiritual vision of all religious traditions, which motivates people of faith to make the commitment to take practical actions for children. Fulfilling these commitments requires the collaborations of religious communities with each other, and with other partners, because these challenges cut across all religions and are too great for any one group to handle alone.[3]

Religious communities play a key role for the care and protection of children and have been a key partner to the work of many child rights organizations. Throughout the world, child rights organizations, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), are working with religious communities of all faiths to address the well-being of children in areas ranging from health care and education to HIV and AIDS to protection from exploitation and abuse.

This article explains why it is important for child rights organizations to work with religious communities, provides examples of successful work with religious communities (in particular UNICEF's work with religious communities), discusses the main challenges of such partnerships and proposes what can be carried out to further effective engagement. In this article, religious communities refers to both men and women religious actors and structures within religious traditions and organizations at all levels—from local to global. These include grassroots and local communities, leaders, scholars, practitioners, youth groups, women of faith

networks, faith-based organizations and denominational, ecumenical and intra-religious umbrella organizations, and networks.[4]

Why partner with religious communities?

As the United Nations Children's agency responsible for promoting the care, protection, and rights of children all over the world, UNICEF works in all types of contexts and in areas ranging from health to nutrition, water and sanitation, to education, HIV and AIDs, and protection of children from violence, exploitation, and abuse. Partnerships with key actors, such as civil society, and government, are a central feature of UNICEF's efforts to promote the rights of children. Indeed, it has long been recognized at UNICEF, as it has throughout the United Nations, that achieving the Millennium Development Goals depends on working in partnership with all sectors of society. Key among these essential partners is religious communities.

With their extraordinary moral authority and power, religious communities are able to influence thinking, foster dialogue, and set priorities for members of their communities. As those who are often the first to respond to problems, religious communities have the trust and confidence of individuals, families, and communities.[5]

From the smallest villages to the largest cities, and from districts and provinces to national and international levels, religious communities offer large networks for the care and protection of children and the safeguarding of their rights. The role of religious communities tends to be especially important at the family and community levels, which international organizations and governments are generally less able to reach effectively.[6] With almost five billion people belonging to religious communities, the potential for action is substantial.

Child rights organizations, including UNICEF, are guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most comprehensive legal instrument for the protection of the rights of the child. There is often a misperception that the language of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is contrary to religious beliefs. But the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and ratified more quickly and widely than any other human rights instrument, was not created in a vacuum:

> The Convention on the Rights of the Child reflects a vision of children in which children are social actors, members of a family and a community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to their age and stage of development. This holistic vision of the child, as well as the principles of justice, humanity and dignity articulated in the articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, corresponds with the visions and principles of the world's religious traditions. As a universal statement of consensus about how children should be treated, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was informed by, and reflects, the deeply held values embedded in major religious traditions.[7]

Key components of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that connect with major religious traditions include:[8]

1. Fundamental belief in the dignity of the child;
2. High priority given to children and the idea of rights and duties of all members of society toward them;
3. A holistic notion of the child and a comprehensive understanding of his or her material emotional and spiritual needs; and,
4. The importance given to family as the best place for the upbringing of the child.

There is strong consensus across religious traditions about the inherent dignity of every child. At the 2006 Religions for Peace World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, almost 1,000 religious leaders from all world Religions adopted the 'Multi-Religious Commitment to Confront Violence Against Children' (Kyoto Declaration) in which they stated that ''We find strong consensus across our religious traditions about the inherent dignity of every person, including children . . . . Our faith traditions take a holistic view of a child's life, and thus seek to uphold all the rights of the child in the context of its family, community and the broader social, economic and political environment. All children hold these rights equally and we must ensure that boys and girls have equal opportunities to enjoy these rights, particularly education, protection, health, social development and participation. Our religious communities are blessed to be multi-generational, and we must use this to support the active participation of children in their own development and to address issues of violence.''[9]

Success in engaging religious communities

Throughout the world, religious communities are in the vanguard of promoting actions to ensure children survive and thrive to adulthood. In clinics and schools, meeting places, youth groups, clubs, and of course temples, churches, mosques, and synagogues, they provide health care for poor families, schooling for vulnerable children, love, and support to children and young people affected by AIDS, and skills programs for young people. Their collective reach and impact is enormous. For example, the fiscal contribution of faith-based volunteers throughout Africa to address HIV and AIDS was estimated to be worth U.S.$5 billion per annum in 2006, an amount similar in magnitude to the total funding provided for HIV and AIDS by all bilateral and multilateral agencies.[10] Many of these interventions take place in close collaboration with civil society, governments, and United Nation agencies, such as UNICEF.[11]

UNICEF has a long history of working across the globe with religious communities of all faiths on far ranging issues that affect children. The following are a few examples in different areas of work reflecting the diversity of interventions and religious actors.[12] While the examples are taken mostly from UNICEF's experiences, the potential for these types of partnerships extend to other child rights organizations, many of which already extensively work with religious communities.

Child protection

In Egypt, Al-Azhar University and UNICEF jointly developed a manual, ''Children in Islam, Their Care, Protection and Development,'' designed to underscore how the care, protection, and development of children is central to Islam. The manual includes research papers and extracts of Koranic verses, Hadiths and Sunnas, that provide useful guidance on children's rights to such things as health, education, and protection. Published in 2005 in Arabic, French and English, the manual has been widely distributed and used as a tool for theologians and imams, child rights and welfare workers, health care providers, educators, policy makers and others involved in promoting and protecting the rights of children. It has helped combat the erroneous belief that the Convention on the Rights of the Child goes against the basic tenets and beliefs of Islam.

For example, the manual has helped change the misperception that religion backs female genital mutilation/cutting, some form of which between 100 and 140 million girls and women worldwide have undergone. In Egypt, the Grand Sheikh of Cairo's Al-Azhar mosque, Sayyed Mohammad Tantawi, a prominent Muslim religious leader, and the Coptic Patriarch Pope Shenouda III, have both declared that female genital mutilation/cutting has "no foundation in the religious texts" of either Islam or Christianity. In June 2007, the Egyptian Grand Mufti Sheikh Ali Gomaa made a statement that the custom is prohibited in Islam.

In Mauritania, where corporal punishment is widespread and considered a suitable discipline method in both Koranic and secular schools, as well as families, UNICEF worked with the Imams' and Religious Leaders' Network for Child Rights, which carried out a study that concluded that corporal punishment has no place in the Koran, and thus has no place in Islam. The results of the study formed the basis of a *fatwā* (a religious opinion issued by an Islamic authority) barring physical and verbal violence against children in the educational system, as well as in the home.

Other UNICEF partnerships with religious communities included a Child-Friendly Local Church Communities initiative with the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, which included the publication of bible-based study guides on children's rights and integration of child rights into Sunday homilies, and a partnership with key religious leaders in Iran that developed a publication on "Discipline without Violence: Child abuse from the point of view of Shi'ism.

At the 2006 Religions for Peace World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, almost one thousand religious leaders from all world religions adopted the 'Multi-religious Commitment to Confront Violence against Children' (Kyoto Declaration). The Kyoto Declaration outlines ways religious communities can work to eliminate violence in line with the recommendations from the United Nations Secretary-General Study on Violence against Children.[13]

Health

There are many global health initiatives, such as the push to eradicate polio, that have benefited significantly from social mobilization activities by religious communities. Several years ago in Nigeria, which is one of the last battlegrounds in the fight against polio, unfounded rumors in

northern Nigeria about the safety of the oral polio vaccine stopped the immunization campaign, threatening to undermine the entire global eradication effort. UNICEF and other agencies worked closely with religious leaders for them to directly address their own communities to counter the rumors and get the campaign back on track.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, UNICEF is working with five of the largest Christian, Muslim, and Traditional religious groups to promote at household and community levels key child survival practices, such as exclusive breastfeeding, hand washing, immunization, and use of insecticide-treated mosquito nets. The five groups were strategically selected based on their credibility and capacity to promote behavior and social change, as well as their representation of a vast majority of the Congolese people. Together, their networks have the potential to reach more than half of the estimated 65 million people in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

During the Civil War in El Salvador, the Catholic Church negotiated a ceasefire to allow children on both sides of the conflict to be immunized. Similar efforts have been replicated in other conflict affected countries, such as Sri Lanka and Sudan. In Ethiopia, UNICEF partnered with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church so that at baptisms caretakers are asked by priests about the immunization status of the child and encouraged to complete the vaccination schedule within the child's first year.

Education

In Afghanistan, development and humanitarian agencies works closely with religious leaders to promote key programs including girls' education and child health. Imams regularly promote girls' enrolment, national immunization days, and other health campaigns through Friday worship across Afghanistan. In areas with limited school and medical facilities, mosques are used as classrooms and immunization centers.

HIV and AIDS

Through its Regional Buddhist Leadership Initiative Sangha Metta (''compassionate monks''), UNICEF has involved a growing number of Buddhist monks, nuns and lay teachers in the Mekong sub-region and as far away as Bhutan in the Buddhist response to HIV and AIDS prevention and care. What began as a small number of committed monks and nuns has

grown into an outstanding outreach program. Buddhist leaders are employing ideas and skills they have gained through the initiative to carry out low-cost, sustainable prevention and care activities in their local communities. They have been involved in prevention programs with young people, spiritual counselling, and supporting vulnerable families and children affected by HIV and AIDS.

The same collaborative structure was later used in the fight against avian influenza. In Cambodia, for example, nearly 6,000 Buddhist monks and nuns, along with many Muslim and Christian leaders, attended 70 orientations throughout the country sponsored by UNICEF and the Ministry of Cultures and Religions. The religious leaders then were able to disseminate information through their visits to communities and when people visited temples.

Challenges of working with religious communities and what can be performed to further effective engagement[14]

Just as it is important to understand the strengths of working with religious communities, it is also important to understand the challenges of such work. In some cases, religious communities can promote attitudes and actions that present risk to children's well-being. As acknowledged by the nearly 1,000 religious leaders from all over the world at the 2006 Religious for Peace World Assembly: ''we must acknowledge that our religious communities have not fully upheld their obligations to protect our children from violence. Through omission, denial and silence, we have at times tolerated, perpetuated and ignored the reality of violence against children in homes, families, institutions and communities, and not actively confronted the suffering that this violence causes. Even as we have not fully lived up to our responsibilities in this regard, we believe that religious communities must be part of the solution to eradicating violence against children, and we commit ourselves to take leadership in our religious communities and the broader society.''[15]

It is essential for child rights organizations to directly address harmful traditional practices within religious communities, many times the best strategy being working directly with religious leaders, who then themselves work within their communities to eliminate such practices. Success in this area often requires separating what is cultural from what is religious, as was performed in the effort to promote the elimination of female

genital cutting/mutilation, and in preventing harmful practices from being upheld in the name of religions that, in fact, do not support them.

Even with the best of intentions, religious communities may lack the technical knowledge and capacity to effectively ensure the care and protection of children. It is important to work with religious communities to increase their access to good practice and evidence-based approaches to support children. Organizations such as UNICEF have extensive technical expertise and field experience to provide such support, but it is essential the support be provided in a way that is understood by religious communities and within the structures of communication already in place.

It is essential for children's rights organizations and religious communities to have the adequate knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively engage with each other in constructive ways—for example to understand each other's roles, working methods, way of speaking and structures to help identify effective entry points for co-operation.[16,17] The language of religion and child rights may at times seem oppositional. However, a deeper understanding and analysis of each other's language can reveal greater commonality, shared values, and goals than may be at first apparent. "The fundamental values shared by most of the world's religions have informed children's rights. There is more common ground between religious and humanitarian belief systems than is often assumed, and the work of "translating" child rights concepts into the more commonly understood tenets and beliefs of religious communities has shown to have a very positive effect in grassroots child protection advocacy work."[18] Unless a concerted effort is made for religious communities and child rights organizations to understand each other's language and values, they risk being unable to see the areas in which they are in agreement and may lead to erroneous conclusions about their ability to work together on behalf of children.

It is important that child rights organizations do not favor one religious group over another. They must work to forge inclusive and, where relevant, multi-religious partnerships based on how best to promote the rights of children. As secular and non-partisan organizations focused on the well-being of children, many child rights organizations can leverage their neutrality to mobilize support from all religious actors and use their mandates to encourage all actors to champion

children's rights. For example, UNICEF's global reputation as an organization dedicated to children, and its expertise and mandate as a secular and non-partisan actor, furnish it with a breadth of relationships as well as the ability to play an effective convening role in bringing together key actors—ranging from governments to civil society actors to religious communities—around children's issues at global, regional, and country levels.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the wide-ranging nature of promoting the rights of children calls for a multifaceted approach. It is critical that people from all communities work together to ensure that the promotion of children's rights is at the center of concern. Religious communities bring diverse strengths and assets to the efforts to promote the well-being of children and by forging links with child rights organizations, they broaden and enrich the network of involvement and impact.[19] As recognized at the 2006 Religions for Peace World Assembly: "None of us can address this problem alone. It requires partnerships, solidarity, and building alliances. Even as our religions have much to offer, we also are open to learning more about the development and well-being of children from other sectors, so that we can each maximize our strengths. We are strongly committed to fostering effective mechanisms for inter-religious cooperation to more effectively combat violence against children."[20] Similarly, child rights organizations, such as UNICEF, need to also further engage with religious communities, especially in contexts where religion plays an essential role within communities.

UNICEF is not alone in being committed to working in partnership with religious communities to ensure the care and protection of the world's children. It is widely recognized within the United Nations and by civil society organizations and the private sector—and among religious communities themselves—that solid, varied, and long-standing partnerships are essential to achieving internationally agreed goals such as the Millennium Development Goals. Much has been accomplished through partnerships between religious communities and child rights organizations and much more can be done. There is still huge untapped potential. If we can recognize that potential and be open to finding common ground even when it appears that traditions and customs are at

odds, we can achieve much for the world's most vulnerable and marginalized children. It is essential for child rights organizations and religious communities to work together harnessing each other's strengths into a joint vision to support children.

Notes

1. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this paper are those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of UNICEF.

2. Stephen Hanmer, Civil Society and Parliamentary Specialist, manages UNICEF's work with religious communities and parliaments. Mr. Hanmer has worked for the past twelve years in programs for vulnerable and at-risk children in the United States, Pakistan, Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, India, Brazil as well as throughout West and East Africa. Mr. Hanmer holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from Yale University and Juris Doctor in Law and Masters in Social Work degrees from Columbia University.

3. World Conference on Religion and Peace, *Care, Commitment and Collaboration: The Role of Religious Communities in Creating a World Fit for Children*. The outcome report of a multi-religious gathering on the occasion of the United Nations Special Session on Children, New York, 6–7 May 2002, p. 7.

4. UNICEF and Religions for Peace, *From Commitment to Action: What Religious Communities can do to Eliminate Violence Against Children*, 2010, p. II.

5. Hanmer, Stephen, and Aaron Greenberg and Ghazal Keshavarzian. *Religious Communities take the lead for* Children. Dharma World 2009, April-June Vol. 36.

6. Ibid.

7. UNICEF and Religions for Peace, *From Commitment to Action: What Religious Communities Can Do to Eliminate Violence against Children*, 2010, p. 17.

8. Volkmann, Dr. Christian Salazar, "Why and how UNICEF cooperates with religious leaders in Iran," UNICEF, Tehran, February 2008. pp. 1–2.

9. Religions for Peace, *Multi-Religious Commitment to Confront Violence against Children*, a declaration made at the Religions for Peace Eight World Assembly, Kyoto, Japan, August 2006. For more on the role of religious communities to eliminate violence against children, see the UNICEF and Religions for Peace publication *From Commitment to Action: What Religious Communities can do to Eliminate Violence against Children*, 2010.

10. Tearfund (2006). Faith untapped: Why churches can play a crucial role in tackling HIV and AIDS in Africa. Teddington, UK, Tearfund. Cited in Joint Learning Initiative on Children and HIV/AIDS, 2009, p. 28.

11. Hanmer, Stephen, and Aaron Greenberg and Ghazal Keshavarzian. *Religious Communities Take the Lead for Children*. Dharma World 2009, April–June Vol. 36.

12. Some of the examples are excerpted from Hanmer, Stephen, and Aaron Greenberg and Ghazal Keshavarzian. *Religious Communities Take the Lead for Children*. Dharma World 2009, April–June Vol. 36.

13. For more on the role of religious communities to eliminate violence against children, see the UNICEF and Religions for Peace publication *From Commitment to Action: What Religious Communities Can Do to Eliminate Violence against Children*, 2010.

14.   Some of the ideas in this section are based on a March 2010 UNICEF and Religions for Peace consultation on the role of religious communities to protect children affected by conflict.

15.   Religions for Peace, *Multi-Religious Commitment to Confront Violence against Children*, a declaration made at the Religions for Peace Eight World Assembly, Kyoto, Japan, August 2006.

16.   UNICEF and Religions for Peace, *Conflict, Child Protection, and Religious Communities: Enhancing Protection through Partnerships – A Literature and Desk Review* (working paper) (February 2010).

17.   In Botswana, for example, a wide variety of religious organizations worked with UNICEF to develop faith-specific sermon notes and religious materials on specific children's rights issues that resonated within their respective communities.

18.   UNICEF and Religions for Peace, *Conflict, Child Protection, and Religious Communities: Enhancing Protection through Partnerships – A Literature and Desk Review* (working paper) (February 2010), p. 26.

19.   UNICEF and Religions for Peace, *From Commitment to Action: What Religious Communities Can Do to Eliminate Violence against Children*, 2010.

20.   Religions for Peace, *Multi-Religious Commitment to Confront Violence against Children*, a declaration made at the Religions for Peace Eight World Assembly, Kyoto, Japan, August 2006.