



Religions for Peace 

JOINT LEARNING INITIATIVE on
FAITH & LOCAL COMMUNITIES



Religions for Peace-UNICEF

Multi-Religious Faith- in- Action

Regional Webinar in Regional

Office for South Asia (ROSA)

2020

Highlights/Summary Report

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Seven Regional Webinars to launch the Multi-religious Faith in Action COVID 19 Global Initiative #FaithinActionCOVID-19 | March-May 2020. See full Executive Summary of all webinars [here](#).

BACKGROUND

At the onset of the Global COVID pandemic in February 2020, the 3 main partners of the Global Initiative on **Faith and Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities** (FPCC) agreed to launch a multi-religious initiative to address the needs of families and communities in relation to the pandemic. FPCC is a partnership between Religions for Peace, UNICEF, and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI).

The #FaithinActionCOVID-19 initiative which was [launched](#) on April 7 by RfP, top religious leaders and UNICEF Executive Director released a joint statement and call-to-action to mobilize faith leaders for an on-going response to the global crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The #FaithinActionCOVID-19 Initiative has outlined the following **7 main actions** as its core objectives:

1. Manage communication, misinformation, and rumors
2. Dispel fear, stigma, discrimination, reduce tensions and promote social harmony
3. Promote adaptation of religious gatherings, practices, rituals, handwashing, and hygiene
4. Address the specific needs of vulnerable groups
5. Promote the prevention of violence against children and women
6. Promote the participation and active engagement of children and young people
7. Promote and support the recovery of social services, resilience and return to normalcy

The Initiative also seeks to promote the wider FPCC goal of large scale **engagement of local multi-religious leaders**, their **faith communities** and **local FBOs**, in collaboration with **UNICEF country offices** through learning exchange, joint priority-setting and action planning, and mutual support.

REGIONAL WEBINARS

To rapidly connect with religious leaders, UNICEF country offices, FBOs, and other partners for briefing, consultation, and learning exchange, the Initiative organized a series of 7 regional webinars, aiming to:

- **Increase awareness** and strengthen **coordinated efforts** of the global Faith-in-Action Initiative,
- **Mobilize** and call to action inter-faith commitments of Religious Leaders and Faith representatives including Women of Faith and Interfaith Youth Network.
- **Equip** these influencers with a set of global guidance around the 7 main #Faith-in-Action objectives, including messages and resources that can be customized for local use.
- **Consult** with the religious leaders to learn about their existing efforts, understand their challenges and priorities for support.

Webinar Participants:

- RfP senior religious Leaders, members of regional and national IRCs, including Women of Faith, Interfaith Youth Networks, and district religious leaders
- Representatives from Ministries of Religious Affairs and other relevant Ministries
- National and local FBO affiliates and partners of international FBOs from the FPCC Advisory Group
- UNICEF technical leads from HQ, regional, country office and field offices
- WHO Regional representative
- Others at discretion of RfP

Over **700 participants** and **67 local partners** of international FBOs participated in the 7 Regional webinars. shared information about ongoing activities and good practice; listened to and asked questions about 3 thematic presentations; collectively identified key issues and challenges they were facing; and framed priority needs and asks of the Initiative's coordinating partners.

KEY ASKS & PRIORITIES

As a result of the webinars, several priority needs and asks will be supported as articulated by religious leaders, FBOs, and UNICEF staff:

- **Information dissemination** | assistance in content creation, framing appropriate messages that will balance science and religion, dissemination strategies, with particular focus on inclusion of technologically isolated, underrepresented and vulnerable groups.
- **Platform** | access to technical resources and outreach activities on a common platform.
- **Evidence gathering** | support in generating evidence from faith communities to inform communication strategies and inter-religious advocacy.
- **Vulnerable groups** | support for increased inclusion and participation of youth and women, religions that are not formally recognized, and advocacy and support on sexual and reproductive health.
- **Official Collaboration** | more systematic collaboration between sub-national and national levels and increased communication with the health sector.

Overarching and Strategic Asks

1. Desire to move beyond the global call to action and regional orientation to **concrete action on the ground at national and sub-national levels.**
2. Call for UNICEF as convener of a mechanism for systematic integration of the inter-faith constituency in global COVID-19 response. Specifically, formalizing a Troika (UNICEF, Inter-religious Councils and IFBOs) operating at global, regional, national and subnational levels.

ACTIONABLES

Resources

- Widely disseminate #FaithinAction resources, including thematic guidance presentation, technical resources.

Community

- Reach back to all regional webinar participants with package of materials and encourage widespread dissemination of the package to respective regional and local networks.
- Where possible support joint review and local adaptation of the Guidance.
- UNICEF and RfP co-hosting regular dialogue platform as a community information and feedback mechanism.
- Develop database of focal points within UNICEF, Inter-Religious Councils and FBOs (see Contacts Tab on website).
- Ensure inclusion of less-established faith and traditional groups.

Institutionalization

- Forge relationships between UNICEF and RfP entities at regional level.
- Support formation of country-level Inter-Faith Advisory Groups.
- Coordinate joint action planning and develop joint action plans.
- Ensure adherence to FPCC principles of participatory planning and non-instrumentalization of faith leaders.
- Support development of RfP-UNICEF Inter-Faith plans linked to country level Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) plans (and eventually the wider COVID-19 plans).
- Support development and implementation of a digital engagement strategy, engaging interfaith youth networks.
- Develop simple monitoring and evaluation (M&E) strategy, with indicators relating to the joint action and with reporting mechanism for the RCCE country plan.

KEY RESOURCES

- [Website: faith4positivechange.org](https://faith4positivechange.org)
- [Background to the Initiative](#)
- [Regional Webinar Reports](#)
- [Thematic guidance documents](#)
- [Resources on Faith & Positive Change](#)

Summary Report of the Multi-Religious Faith-in-Action Regional Webinar in ROSA (Region of South Asia)

Participants: Deepika Singh, Dr. Vinu Aram, Layla Saad, Jean Duff, Dr. Kerida McDonald, Sonia Sarkar, Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, Dr. Deepali Bhanat, Sri Sri Sugendra Theerthaswamiji, Aruna Oswal, Huma Ikramullah, Venerable Dhammajothi, Nazrul Hussain, Archbishop Felix Machado

Examples of Faith-in-Action Responses by Country/Organization

Pakistan

- **Increasing youth access to education** - Teachers and local advisors have been hosting online school & webinars to inform children about how they can create change during quarantine (ex: Climate Change for youth webinar)
- The Prime Minister announced that public school lectures will be televised on local TV stations for 1st – 10th grade as well as select college and university classes for Adolescents who don't have internet access
- **Donation of materials** - Donations to local NGOs for food and ration distributions to the poorest districts

India

- **Managing Rumours and Misinformation** - Government has taken action against misinformation on social media and fake news sites by:
 - o creating public advisories and creating advertisements for social media platforms and mass media
 - o stopping the creators of fake news
 - o utilizing cybersecurity tools to ban portals of discrimination and online abuse
- Efforts are being initiated to promote the work of religious leaders on social media
- Positive messages are being pushed out to uplift society and eradicate stigma
- **Enforcement of physical distancing** - Police are strictly monitoring the lockdown and preventing especially young people from unnecessarily going out on non-essential trips
- Women are playing important roles in societies as they are coming to action and helping out vulnerable communities
- **Healthcare assistance** - Nuns are playing a big role in providing healthcare and education for children who don't have access to these facilities

Nepal

- **Mitigation of interfaith conflict** - Religious Leaders are coming together to stop the hatred towards and between religious groups

Sri Lanka

- Religious Leaders in the local area distributed milk powder to pregnant women and mothers who have children under the age of 5
- Religious community centers are being used for food distribution as Sri Lankans are not able to go to the grocery stores even if they have sufficient financial means
- **Correct & Impactful messaging strategies** - Community advocacy is done through the combination of physical help and message delivery for impactful change

Shanti Ashram in India

- Partnered with the Indian government to help ~4,000 vulnerable families prone to food security
- **Official unifying alliance** - Interfaith collaboration as they released a “Call to Peace and Collaboration” to avoid the burden between faith communities during the pandemic
- **Youth peer support groups** - Facilitated children intervention programs that provide the following facilities:
 - o Survival rights: health care, food, shelter, etc.
 - o Creative outlets
 - o Child Participation: getting children involved in solving problems in their local communities

Collective ROSA Faith Initiatives

- The initiative created by UNICEF called “My Home My School” provides online lectures through WhatsApp with the help of 12K volunteers
- **Protection for healthcare & essential workers** - 10,000 PPE material for frontline workers is produced in local sewing facilities
- Partnerships with various UN agencies and governments to produce advocacy
- **Virtual community-building efforts** - Interfaith webinars are hosted to discuss issues on keeping faith communities safe, how to plant the seeds for the “new normal”, and how to create hope in times of fear and uncertainty
- Virtual spaces for mediation, motivation, yoga, and spiritual discourse are provided by religious leaders
- **Monetary fund available for interfaith initiatives** - *RfP* initiated the Multi-Religious Humanitarian Fund to provide seed funding for organizations and IRCs responding to COVID-19 and to support multi-religious initiatives

Main Issues and Challenges

- **Unclear messaging** - Unclear difference between physical distancing, social distancing, self-isolation, and social isolation
- Transition efforts from survival needs to creating lasting social and behavioral change
- **The risk for education** - Children in rural areas are not able to access technology and education, which therefore puts them at higher risk for dropping out of school, being abused, participating in child labor, or going through child marriage

- **Lack of basic health facilities** - An inadequate amount of correct handwashing stations and hygiene facilities in rural areas
- **Increased domestic and gender-based violence in households** - Fear that women and children are at higher risk of abuse by men within their communities
- **Communication issues** - Language barrier between rural and urban areas when official authorities send out national messaging (e.g. in Pakistan government messaging is done in English and Urdu but not translated to local languages)
- **Fear for interfaith conflict** - Interfaith aggression and discrimination
- **Managing rumors and misinformation** - False information sent out through social media and fake websites
- **Increase in online child abuse** - Increase in children being abused online
- **Confusion on how to live in this “new normal”** - Families are in fear and struggle to adjust to the “new normal”

Priority Needs and Asks of UNICEF

- Suggestion, that Religious Leaders ensure sending of messages in collaboration with local elected representatives more diligently **Increase national efforts** - More systematic collaboration between sub-national and national levels
- **Hosting a common information platform** - Create a platform in for Religious Leaders to share their voices and lessons with one another to others
- **Assistance in providing correct messaging** - Mitigating misinformation
- **Access to essential resources** - Addressing food security issues
- **Support for inclusion of less established faith and traditional groups** - Continue to include less-established faith as well as traditional groups into the joint collaboration between RfP and UNICEF