



Religions for Peace-UNICEF

Multi-Religious Faith- in- Action

Regional Webinar in Middle East and North Africa Regions (MENA)

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 MENA (Middle East and North Africa Regions)

Participants: Hon. Meherzia Labidi-Maiza, Prof. Dr. Azza Karam, Carla Daher, Rima Shawkani, Ms. Samra Luka, Bishop Younan Munib, Mr. Faris Elias Ketit, Dr. Rabab al Sadr, Dr. Rawya, Dr. Asmaa Keftarou, Sahar Hegazi, Salah Al Hanafy, Dr. Yagob Almazrou, Cheikh Mohamad Abu Zayd

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

Tunisia

- **Religious Leaders hold responsibilities beyond their typical roles.** Religious Leaders serve communities on a practical, interpersonal, and humanistic levels. They must exhibit precaution during ritual, manage concerns and prevent violence during quarantine, and unite communities to promote public health guidelines.

Egypt

- **Faith organizations partner with the public health sector.** The Order of the Franciscan Fathers intends to implement public dispensaries under the supervision of the Egyptian Ministry of Health. Further, they are preparing ad-hoc health centers for the care and treatment of ill patients, in case the epidemic worsens.

Lebanon

- **Religious institutions provide psychological care to workers and children.** The Middle East Council of Churches supports parishioners, energizes workers, and offers specialized psychological and spiritual services.
- **Youth are participating in interfaith dialogue.** Young adults, ages 16-17, are participating in critical conversations to understand the similarities and differences between faith traditions, thus overcoming notions of “the other.”
- **Interactive activities offer solidarity to children.** Children across various faiths are sending letters, drawings, and songs to other children in quarantine. Using creative outlets, such as music and photography, to provide entertainment and comfort to the country’s youth.

Palestine

- **Universal day of prayer.** On 14 May 2020, Sheikh Ahmed Al Tayeb and Pope Francis collaborated in supporting a universal day of prayer to end the pandemic and offer solidarity to all the lives affected.

Main Issues and Challenges

Dissemination of False Information

- Inaccurate theories and fake news are being circulated in local communities making it difficult for people to differentiate what protocols they should follow.
- Religious Leaders must nullify the belief that the pandemic is a punishment from God by stressing “God is love.”
- The community must mitigate the cases of discrimination and prejudice as a consequence of rumor and false information.

Violence Against Children

- The pandemic disproportionately affects children as schools are closed and domestic violence augments in quarantine.
- Organizations must work to secure safe housing and shelter for orphans. Authorities have considered closing orphanages in an effort to practice physical distancing regulations.
- Faith communities must work to provide protection and psychological support to the youth.

Refugees

- In refugee camps, large populations and close living conditions hinder the ability to practice physical distancing protocols. Further, crowding presents a public health threat, since the coronavirus can spread rapidly.

Interfaith Collaboration

- Society’s religious endowment plays an important role in generating solidarity. Cooperation and resource management will help to restructure the concept of public good and service.
- Religious leaders must exemplify sustainable peace with inclusive messaging and collaboration with other faiths. Finding common ground can facilitate and promote the practice of public health protocols.

Priority Needs and Asks of UNICEF

- **Protection of vulnerable groups:** How can UNICEF abate incidences of violence against children and women, either through grassroots movements, spiritual connection, or other civic intervention?
- **Mental health services:** UNICEF and religious institutions must acknowledge and prepare for potential psychological and social repercussions among communities.
- **Consolidation of resources and partnerships:** The dissemination and adaptation of the Multi-Religious Faith-in-Action Resource package will connect and coordinate Religious Leaders with their local communities. In addition, it will provide a platform to document initiatives, monitor efforts, and evaluate actions addressing the pandemic.