



# FAITH AND POSITIVE CHANGE FOR CHILDREN

GLOBAL INITIATIVE ON  
SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

*Case Study*

**UNICEF South Sudan**

*Humanitarian-Development  
Nexus in South Sudan:  
Overcoming fragile weakened  
governance through faith-  
based institutions to promote  
sustained community  
engagement for child wellbeing*



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**Cover photo credit:**

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*Fourteen-month-old Adut William in his home in Aweil. Adut was diagnosed with severe acute malnutrition.*

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## OVERVIEW

- UNICEF South Sudan C4D is focused on sustaining community engagement during an L2 emergency with widespread food insecurity, conflict and displacement. In communities, religious leaders are key influencers and communication channels. Hence their engagement must be maintained to create social change.
- UNICEF works with religious leaders to provide key lifesaving messages and increase their knowledge on subjects related to child rights so that the religious leaders can integrate these messages into their routine sermons and community announcements and facilitate in-depth dialogue with followers of the faith to shape their attitudes and practices.
- Due to instability in the country, governance structures are weakened and community leaders, including religious leaders, must be engaged on a community by community basis to support community engagement. UNICEF has created an Integrated Community Mobilization Network, now with over 4,500 volunteers, and regularly engages with religious leaders through orientations to sustain the growth of their knowledge and their engagement in improving child wellbeing.

## BACKGROUND

South Sudan is an L2 emergency context characterized by widespread conflict, insecurity, mass displacement, rights violations, and food insecurity. In the current analysis period of January 2019, 6.17 million people (54% of the population) are estimated to have faced Crisis (IPC Phase 3) acute food insecurity or worse. The population of the country is around 11 million with 2 million refugees and nearly two million internally displaced. The conflict has led to economic collapse with inflation reaching a net 300%. Many civil servants, such as teachers and police have been intermittently paid. Financial hardship has led to an increase in crime and violence.<sup>1</sup>

While the majority of South Sudanese are Christians (73.7%) with a small percentage of Muslims (6.2%), traditional religions are also widely practiced (19.7%).<sup>2</sup> Religious leaders are key figures in every community and command broad influence and respect of their faithful. With a high level of illiteracy, poor media coverage and weak service providing institutions at the community level, religious leaders play an important role in taking life-saving messages and facilitating the adoption of healthy and protective behaviour. Religious leaders are viewed as credible sources of information and they are well positioned to promote tolerance and to guide their communities towards peaceful coexistence. In South Sudan, religious persecution is not common, and conflict is rather based along ethnic lines that cut across religions and denominations. Religion works as a bond among people in South Sudan and religious and community leaders can lead social change at the grassroots level.

In some cases, religious links can also be associated with ethnic affiliations, which means that religious leaders' influence may be limited to specific geographical areas and population groups. At the upstream, faith actors have played a significant role in coordinating peace negotiations and charting a peaceful future for the country. Religious leaders and associated networks are fairly united at the national level. They are also well connected to regional actors such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, that support the South Sudanese peace process.

The media environment in South Sudan is characterized by widespread self-censorship due to justified fears among journalists that security forces will target them. Sudan is among the bottom 10 countries in Reporters Without Borders annual press freedom index. There are

national radio and television services (SSTV) but very few people have access to mass media like television. By the end of 2018, around 28% of the population had access to the internet.<sup>3</sup>

There are few daily newspapers with limited circulation, though the majority of the population is illiterate. Next to interpersonal communication, radio remains the most effective means of reaching people. A network of nine faith-based radio stations is supported by the Catholic church to reach communities with reconciliation and peace building messages.

### What is the central intersection of child wellbeing and religion that requires a C4D approach?

The ongoing conflict, insecurity and mass displacement deepened inequalities between women, men, girls and boys in accessing education, livelihood opportunities, protection, and political processes. This causes them to miss out on information regarding their rights and restricts access to maternal and child health, disease prevention, hygiene and prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) promotion information and services. Most children do not have access to essential health services in their early childhood, and a majority of school-age children drop out of school. Additionally, 34% of girls marry at 18 years and under and 12% of girls at 15 years or younger.<sup>4</sup>

Religious leaders hold trusted positions in communities and have regular audiences with large groups of community members in churches, mosques, and other community meetings and events. Because they have an established network of people organized at the regional, district and village level, they can sanction certain behaviours and be allies for social mobilization and policy advocacy. In South Sudan, religious leaders command high respect from political leaders and the general public. UNICEF and faith-based organization can form partnerships based on shared values. If mobilized and equipped with the necessary tools, religious leaders can facilitate dissemination of life-saving information and steer social and behavioural change in their respective communities.

1 "IPC Country Analysis | IPC Global Platform." IPC Portal, [www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/en/?country\\_iso3=SS](http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/en/?country_iso3=SS).

2 Sawe, Benjamin Elisha. "Religious Beliefs In Sudan." WorldAtlas, 14 Nov. 2016, [www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-sudan.html](http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-sudan.html).

3 "Sudan Profile - Media." BBC News, BBC, 21 Jan. 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14095119>.

4 Girls Not Brides. "Sudan - Child Marriage Around The World. Girls Not Brides." Girls Not Brides, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/south-sudan/>.

# C4D OUTCOMES

## UNICEF's Global C4D Outcomes

**Outcome 1: Increasing Knowledge and Demand for Services**

**Outcome 2: Improving Caregiving Practices**

**Outcome 3: Addressing Social Norms, Attitudes and Public Opinions**

**Outcome 4: Improving Community Engagement and Social Mobilization in Humanitarian and Development Settings**

The process of influencing behaviours and shifting social norms to achieve these outcomes requires the involvement and buy-in of key decision makers such as religious and community leaders, stakeholders, and agents of change from both genders. Through cross-sectoral approaches and integrated programming involving Child Protection, Health, Nutrition, WASH, and Education, C4D has developed and implemented behaviour change communication strategies addressing issues related to maternal and child health, disease prevention, and hygiene promotion (including Menstrual Hygiene Management).

Overarching outcomes include:

- All children in South Sudan visit a station or outreach sites at least five times by their first birthday to ensure children are immunized as required.
- All children under five received polio vaccines during the campaigns and remained free from polio ever since.
- Both boys and girls are enrolled in schools, and completed primary education where they learned to read and write.
- Children under 18 are enrolled in schools and protected from recruitment as child soldiers.
- Newborn children are registered through the birth notification system.

Regarding C4D with religious leaders and faith-based organizations, the following are the targeted outcomes:

## Family level

- Parents take appropriate care of their children during pregnancy and afterwards for immunization and nutrition.
- Children get breastfed till 6 months of age.
- Both boys and girls are treated equally.
- Parents enroll girls in school instead of marrying them off as children.
- All children regardless of their gender regularly attend school.
- Members of each family are conversant on at least five key lifesaving messages and apply them in their own lives.

## Community level

- Community members have a collective understanding of critical child-related issues from a trusted source.

## Policy/system level

- Political leaders and state executives are organized to facilitate mechanisms and measures supported by faith actors.

UNICEF South Sudan engage religious leaders as part of their Communication for Development work. Religious beliefs, in many cases, are aligned with key messages on health, immunization, education, and child protection issues. Therefore, religious leaders and faith-based organizations can partner with UNICEF in achieving its broad programmatic aims.

# C4D STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

## Activities

### Religious engagement as a key component of C4D activities

UNICEF South Sudan engages religious leaders as a key part of their Communication for Development work. Faith-based organizations are capacitated to implement C4D approaches to influence positive behaviours and social change. Religious beliefs, in many cases, are aligned with key messages on health, immunization, education, and child protection issues and where they are not there is opportunity for sharing information on negative consequences for children and to influence alternative attitudes and practices that support child wellbeing. Therefore, religious leaders and faith-based organizations can accompany UNICEF in achieving its broad programmatic aims.

UNICEF C4D section currently covers 78 out of the 80 counties in South Sudan through nine implementing partners. The primary initiative is the “Integrated Community Mobilization Network,” which has over 4,500 volunteers in communities throughout the country, each connected to a health center, and often also to a faith-based organization, religious leader, and/or community elder. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations are crucial parts of the mobilization network.

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*They [religious actors] are part and parcel of our community engagement strategy.*

*Gopinath Durairajan, UNICEF C4D South Sudan<sup>5</sup>*

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Vulnerable women and girls are a programmatic focus across South Sudan for UNICEF. Each volunteer covers at least 250 households within their community, to identify and address their information and behavioural gaps. The C4D team engages the local religious leaders, elders, and other community-based institutions as community informants and gate-keepers, to tailor the messages in a way that is appropriate for that community and facilitates the buy-in of the community. As part of this process, youth groups, mothers’ meetings, and other community forums are used to reach broader and different parts of the community. Additionally, the community volunteers collect information every month on cross-cutting issues affecting child well-being such as access to education, immunization, and nutrition. Informed by the data, actions are planned in consultation with key community leaders and religious leaders to address identified issues.

Due to the ongoing humanitarian situation in South Sudan, governance structures for civil society engagement is weak or non-existent, particularly at the lowest level of administration, while religious institutions remain resilient and in most cases intact up to the lowest level of the community. They are therefore critical partners in the C4D strategy. Religious leaders, in their everyday interactions, contribute to social and behaviour change mainly through the dissemination of their knowledge at their churches and mosques, and at community events through announcements.

UNICEF has also engaged with faith-based organizations on an ad hoc basis to support health programs and campaigns geared towards polio and guinea worm eradication as well as prevention of diseases with epidemic potential such as cholera, hepatitis E and measles. UNICEF, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, has also provided orientation to religious leaders on these diseases with epidemic potential. Likewise, when UNICEF holds a campaign four times a year, religious leaders are engaged through orientations on the specific topics of the campaign. Finally, there are other, more localized orientations happening monthly with reporting on numbers of leaders trained and numbers of meetings held. Faith-based organizations and religious leaders generally provide their service voluntary with expenses reimbursed for travel and accommodation related to orientations. Their understanding of their community’s health needs and their recognition of the programmatic importance of partnering with religion motivates them to remain involved.

<sup>5</sup> JLI Interview with UNICEF South Sudan Country Office Representatives. Bangkok, July 9, 2018.

Towards a more systematic approach to faith engagement at community-level, a mapping exercise was undertaken. UNICEF South Sudan has initiated and institutionalized the preparation and use of state and county social maps. This has provided an improved overview of religious and ethnic groups, as well as administrative boundaries of people. All the faith-based organizations working in South Sudan have been mapped based on their programmatic area and geographic location in which they are working. The same social maps also indicate the geographic locations of all the churches and mosques in the country. This has contributed to better planning and outreach to people through faith-based organizations and religious leaders. UNICEF South Sudan partners through Memorandum of Understanding with World Food Programme (WFP) and the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) and South Sudan Islamic Council (SICC) to formalize its relationship with religious actors. These councils provide important platforms for engagement in peacebuilding activities and have also been used to roll-out UNICEF supported, health programs such as routine immunization, and prevention of disease outbreaks such as polio, measles, and cholera.

These maps are used by program planners at State, County, Payam, and Boma level to identify critical resources available in each of the above areas for smooth program implementation. Influencers identified through this mapping exercise are then engaged to support community mobilization activities.

It is equally important that UNICEF South Sudan is generally sensitive to the religious beliefs and practices of people in the country throughout its work. Adjustments are needed in programming between Christian and Islamic communities, taking into account the links to ethnic, linguistic, cultural differences as well. During the Eid celebrations, engaging with religious leaders around the messages they would disseminate was a priority. There was a careful process of ratification, including designing, consulting and verifying messaging with religious leaders to ensure appropriateness. This is the same process for all new messaging that UNICEF South Sudan wishes to use.

## Special Initiatives

UNICEF has also collaborated with partners to jointly undertake activities particularly directed at religious leaders and their affiliated structures.

With Search for Common Ground (SfCG), for example, UNICEF has undertaken several strategic initiatives. In collaboration with SfCG, the Catholic Radio Network conducted a baseline survey on knowledge attitudes and practices for social cohesion and conflict resolution in South Sudan. The research was titled “A Baseline Assessment Communicating for Peace in South Sudan: A Social and Behaviour Change Communication Initiative” and aimed to promote and strengthen social cohesion and resilience to conflict in South Sudan. The research included quantitative data through a household survey among 4,074 respondents and 107 qualitative interviews.

Following the formative research, UNICEF conducted a total of three religious leader reflection and communication workshops, bringing together 37 Christian and Muslim leaders. The workshops took place in Juba, Bor, and Mingkaman, from March-September 2015. The workshops aimed to provide religious leaders with a platform to discuss the drivers of conflict within their communities and brainstorm themes and messages that could be integrated into sermons to reinforce social cohesion and strengthen tolerance. The process resulted in a joint MOU signed by South Sudan Council of Churches, WFP, and UNICEF to promote child rights through C4D programming. In addition to the religious leaders, the government of South Sudan was represented through the participation of Director of the Bureau of Religious Affairs.

Following the training, the trained religious leaders took part in follow-up meetings to strategize and plan for ongoing peacebuilding activities in their communities. This included a “Peace Week” where students at a college developed peace-based curriculums, peace-focused Bible studies, peace conferences with cattle keepers in different cattle camps, International Peace Day celebrations, the development of a “youth peace program”, a three-day “Prayers for the Nation” event in May 2015, and youth prayer days.



Media, specifically radio networks, are a key outreach opportunity. Of UNICEF's 42 radio partners, 10 are run by religious institutions. In one project with the Catholic Radio Network (CRN), UNICEF harnessed the widespread use of radio in the country to spread information. CRN broadcasts through community-based radio stations that have influential and highly localized reach, with an audience of an estimated seven million in total. All stations broadcast shared programs in English around the news, civic education, and other educational programs. Due to the heterogeneous realities of South Sudan, each station is rooted in its locality and broadcasts locally produced culture-sensitive programs in the languages understood by the local people. UNICEF works with CRN to educate community members through various edutainment programs, radio spots, interviews, dramas, features, debate and call-in programs on thematic areas such as health, nutrition, child protection, education, and WASH. Religious leaders and representatives from faith-based organizations participate in talk shows to provide motivational support and answer queries from a faith perspective. In terms of child rights, there is significant buy-in from these religious institutions and their radio networks.

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*The religious organizations play a huge role in ensuring that negotiations happen: releasing the children from militias, and reintegrating them with the family, and then onward integration into the community. They are our go to partners in terms of getting things done...*

*Gopinath Durairajan, UNICEF C4D South Sudan*

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*In collaboration with the Islamic Council UNICEF reached over 25,000 Muslims with lifesaving messages on Cholera and Ebola prevention/control and during Eid Al-Fitr celebrations in Juba.*

## PROGRESS AND RESULTS

Communications with religious leaders are integrated into the standard operations of UNICEF South Sudan through its Communication for Development work. Most of UNICEF supported programs are developed and implemented through the involvement of faith-based organizations and religious leaders with set outcomes relevant to cross-sectoral thematic areas. Engaging religious leaders and faith-based organizations with community leaders has proven to be one of the best ways of facilitating social and behaviour change communication.

The role of community leaders, especially faith leaders, in immunization is particularly significant. In 2017, 15 people died from an outbreak of measles.<sup>6</sup> The deaths occurred after a vaccination campaign which led to erroneous assumptions that the deaths were associated with the vaccine. Panic spread amidst communities and people started to boycott the vaccination. UNICEF South Sudan reached out through their existing links to religious and community leaders who helped to explain the situation to communities and eventually achieved a 95% vaccination rate, despite the outbreak.

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*In South Sudan, because of strong linkages in the community, religious leaders, and institutions, they play a huge role in telling the community about the importance of vaccination.*

*Gopinath Durairajan, UNICEF C4D South Sudan.*

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A period of reflection after the adverse events following immunization (AEFI)<sup>7</sup> helped to highlight the need to bridge humanitarian and development divides. NGOs and UN agencies have been working on health promotion in the area for five decades, yet chains of knowledge and information can break down.

The community volunteer network is an important mechanism for bridging humanitarian and development agendas. Orienting religious leaders on a regular basis helps build knowledge in the communities so that the community volunteers and religious and community leaders become the experts in the community rather than solely relying on outside information.

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*If you do two trainings with them [religious leaders] in a year, that is not going to change anything. We need on-going partnership with them as the key influencers on the ground in ensuring quality services are delivered and the people who are going to take the country forward towards social cohesion and peace..and driven by faith-based values that thrive towards peaceful existence for the community.*

*Gopinath Durairajan, UNICEF C4D South Sudan*

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Overall, the involvement of religious leaders and faith-based organizations in UNICEF South Sudan's programs has enabled greater outreach to the most vulnerable and marginalized populations in hard to reach areas and promoted programme ownership and sustainability among communities.

<sup>6</sup> Gharib, Malaka. "A Botched Vaccine Campaign For Measles Killed 15 Children in South Sudan." NPR, NPR, 2 June 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/06/02/531268150/a-botched-vaccine-campaign-for-measles-killed-15-children-in-south-sudan>.  
<sup>7</sup> An 'Adverse Event Following Immunization (AEFI)' is any untoward medical occurrence which follows immunization and which does not necessarily have a causal relationship with the usage of the vaccine. The adverse event may be any unfavourable or unintended sign, abnormal laboratory finding, symptom or disease (<https://vaccine-safety-training.org/classification-of-aefis.html>).

## Challenges

Due to the vast diversity of religious leaders in towns and villages across the country, UNICEF South Sudan must be sensitive to not highlight any one group over another. The UNICEF strategy integrates faith actors thoroughly, but because of the instability in the country, weakening of governance structures, and lack of free movement between certain areas in the country, many of the religious leaders and organizations remain siloed in their specific geographical areas. Governance structures such as councils of churches and Islamic councils have some reach, but the fragile context is a significant limitation to a fully fledged and organized civil society, of which faith-based organizations can play a part. This is a challenge as UNICEF must individually engage with religious and traditional leaders in different communities rather than being able to organize through existing civil society networks.

Likewise, while denominational divides are not particularly difficult, people belong to different ethnic groups such as the Dinka, Nuer, and Shilluk, which means there is no one way to approach a larger group of Christians, for example, under an overarching religious leadership structure or organizing body. The Muslim communities are more spread throughout the country hardly reached by any other faith-based organization.

The place of religious leaders and faith-based organizations is tied to their geographic location and their tribal and political affiliations. They influence certain regions and with certain groups of people, but their reach does not extend beyond these relatively limited areas. UNICEF must engage with each on a case by case basis. A key lesson from the experience is that religious leaders cannot be mobilized in isolation, but as part of a broader mobilization of community leaders that reflects the intersecting, but differing influences on communities.

In some instances, religious leaders and faith-based organizations navigate the political and ethnic dynamics. Speaking out against political leaders can be dangerous and religious leaders must, therefore, be careful when disseminating messages to the community. Messages on peace, for example, could be politically loaded and need to be judiciously written.

While it is currently a humanitarian context, communication for development can achieve active engagement with religious leaders on issues connected to health and nutrition and other areas of development programming. One thematic issue that is currently not part of the discussion is child marriage (FGM is not practiced in South Sudan). While this more sensitive topic is not yet part of the programming because other basic universal needs are a priority, it remains an issue to be considered as the focus for faith engagement.

Gender dynamics are identified as an issue in the country, and some key social norms around the role of women are perpetuated by religious and traditional leaders. UNICEF South Sudan C4D already works closely with Gender, mainly in relation to changing mindsets around allowing girls to attend school, which is aligned with one of the key country outcomes to prioritize school attendance. There is a demand for healthcare, food, and shelter in communities, but there still needs to be cultural and social change to encourage school attendance for girls and delivery at health facilities for mothers.



## CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

- UNICEF South Sudan C4D is focused on sustaining community engagement. In the community, religious leaders are key influencers and their engagement must be sustained to create change and avoid the situation for child wellbeing reverting to the previous status quo. UNICEF works with religious leaders to provide messages and increase their knowledge of subjects mainly related to child health so that the religious leaders can integrate these messages into their routine sermons and community announcements.
- Due to humanitarian needs and instability in the country, governance structures are weakened and community leaders, including religious leaders, must be engaged on a community by community basis, rather than through already established civil society networks. To overcome this barrier, UNICEF has created its own community mobilization structure, with over 4,500 volunteers, and regularly engages with religious leaders through orientations to sustain the growth of their knowledge and their engagement in improving child wellbeing. UNICEF's added value in this context is the institutional capacity to create such a widespread community mobilization structure and include religious leaders and faith-based organizations within that structure.
- Faith actor mapping has allowed UNICEF to understand where religious leaders and faith-based organizations operate. Further mapping to understand the capacity and resources of these actors is important to help with the prioritization of where and who to support with capacity strengthening.
- Faith-based actors (from local leaders to institutions, including media institutions) are highly present in South Sudan and partnership with them is fundamental to any community engagement.
- Fragility in a country context can affect the governance structures of community institutions, meaning that religious networks can both be one of the stronger institutions still existing, but linkages may also have been weakened or in need of support.
- Future activities to increase sustainability in this model include help with developing and supporting efforts to strengthen platforms for intra- and inter-faith collaboration, and increasing the representation of faith-based organizations in key national committees.

### Strategies for the future include

- Scriptural, technical, and spiritual dialogue: orientations have primarily been focused on technical training and knowledge dissemination so far. To improve engagement with faith actors, it is recognized that there should be more space for dialogue (rather than one-way dissemination of information from UNICEF to religious leaders), especially that which helps religious leaders discuss topics related to child wellbeing in conjunction with scriptural reflection and heart dialogue. In addition to this, other strategies of engagement can be explored such as rites of passage.
- Community systems strengthening: efforts to engage with the development and support of intra- and inter-faith coordination structures will be crucial to supporting the sustainability of current community mobilization and volunteer capacity. These type of faith networks are part of the civil society networks that can act as governance structures once humanitarian agencies no longer need to be present in the country and will help bring the nexus from humanitarian to development aid.
- Accountability and advocacy: likewise, the support of civil society structures, such as faith platforms, act to hold government to account and advocate for needs communicated to them at the grassroots by community members.

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