



# **The First South Asia Regional Strategic Faith Engagement Forum for Positive Change for Children**

**8-10 May 2022, Kathmandu, Nepal.**

**Report.**



### **Acknowledgements**

The Faith for Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities Initiative (FPCC) team would like to thank the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA), the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP), the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI), Religions for Peace International and UNICEF HQ, for coordinating and convening the First South Asia Faith Engagement Forum (The Forum). Special thanks go to UNICEF ROSA Regional Director and Social Behaviour Change Coordinator and staff colleagues for facilitating the meeting. We are grateful to UNICEF ROSA Country Offices, Religions for Peace Chapters and Faith Based Organisations/Faith Actors' Caucuses from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka for their contributions and participation in The Forum.

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*1Group Photo of Participants during the South Asia Faith Engagement Forum*

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## 1.0 Executive Summary

### 1.1 Introduction

- 1) The First South Asia Regional Strategic Faith Engagement Forum for Positive Change for Children (FPCC), Families and Communities was held from the 8th to 10th May 2022 in Kathmandu, Nepal. For a detailed experience of the meeting, please see Annex 1 which captures the proceedings as per the Forum program.
- 2) **Participation.** This 'Forum' brought together over 100 religious leaders, faith actors, faith-based organizations and UNICEF South Asia representatives to develop the first South Asia Regional Faith and Positive Change for Children (FPCC) Strategy. It built on the initial consultations held virtually during the South Asia High-Level Forum for Faith Actors on the 8th December 2021 where commitments to work together on system strengthening of local faith communities for positive change for children, families and communities in South Asia were made.
- 3) **The Forum had three objectives.** First, providing space for faith actors, UNICEF staff and stakeholders to explore avenues of collaboration and engagement in developing joint plans aligned with commitments to improve outcomes for children. Secondly, participants were expected to bring their experience, insights and knowledge to help develop a robust, practical and effective regional faith engagement strategy and, finally, identify and make practical commitments towards improving outcomes for children, families and communities in South Asia. [All meeting presentations, notes and pictures can be accessed in the FPCC Website here.](#)
- 4) **The task for which this Report is written is threefold.** One, to share the proceedings and outcomes of the Forum. Two, to examine the processes, structures and opportunities available for sustained, evidence based and continued faith engagement. And three, to identify the specific commitments and roles of both faith actors and UNICEF ROSA in the planning, implementation and monitoring of the South Asia Faith Engagement Strategy.
- 5) **Results for Children in South Asia.** Primarily the Forum was held to interrogate and identify the extent to which multi-religious and multi-stakeholder collaboration can be mobilised to deliver concrete results for the over 650 million children in South Asia by increasing and expanding the participation of faith actors in the new and existing spaces of engagement.
- 6) **Methodology and Process.** The Forum relied on mixed facilitation approaches with participant-led and driven exercises and activities moderated and facilitated by technical resource persons from Global FPCC Coordinating teams as well as UNICEF ROSA. National Consultations were held in five Religions for Peace Chapters ahead of the Forum and the reports formed the basis of engagement while JLI initiated a partner and context mapping on Faith Engagement to analyse and bring out the evidence. UNICEF provided the regional context and priorities and these conversations and presentations guided the meeting towards developing the draft regional strategy at the end of the Forum. There were three parallel working committees charged with (i) putting together the regional strategy (ii) drafting the conference statement (iii) technical continuity committee in charge of the program.

### 1.2 Summary Outcomes

- 1) **Spaces of Collaboration.** Spaces exist for increased collaboration and engagement of faith actors, however, there's need for improved mapping, coordination and prioritisation based on context to provide a better environment for faith actors to contribute to initiatives and actions that ensure children in South Asia develop to their best potential and promote their wellbeing based on the diverse spirituality and faith traditions of South Asia.

- 2) **Equipping for Action.** Identifying opportunities to build the capacity of faith leaders/actors, the women of faith, and interfaith youth networks, and equipping them with resources within the Mind and Heart Dialogue approach to enable them effectively address key issues and concerns on child rights advocacy and wellbeing.
- 3) **Community engagement and mobilising faith assets and actors** in advocating for policy change through child-welfare and protection legislation, and positively engage the government at various levels for the enforcement of laws to protecting child rights
- 4) **Evidence generation, feedback and learning.** To promote and profile what works, what needs to be changed and how this will influence the ROSA strategy.

### 1.3 Recommendations and Wayforward.

The following are the recommendations and way forward

- 1) Completion of the [mapping process](#) led by JLI to help determine the basis and scope of engagement.
- 2) Establishing the coordination mechanisms by setting up the Regional Advisory Group to coordinate and guide engagement.
- 3) Roll-out of country level actions under the [Regional Faith Engagement Strategy](#) developed during the Forum.
- 4) Capacity building and skills development on the [Mind and Heart approach](#) including identifying Regional Training partner/institute for contextualization and roll-out.
- 5) Increased community level engagement and actions working with faith actors, congregational groups, women, youth and children to generate evidence based approaches and activities that deliver results for children.
- 6) Continued evidence generation, review and learning through a robust M&E process that promoted feedback and engagement across the eight ROSA countries
- 7) Community engagement, advocacy and collaboration building on the [Statement of the ROSA Faith Engagement Forum](#).
- 8) Support and actualization of Country level Action plans for [Afghanistan](#), [Bangladesh](#), [Bhutan](#), [India](#), [Maldives](#), [Nepal](#), [Pakistan](#) and [Sri Lanka](#) using the MFACCs as the basis of tripartite coordination and integration of [Mind and Heart Methodology](#) and approaches.
- 9) Enhancing literacy and understanding among UNICEF, Faith Actors and stakeholders of Faith Engagement and FPCC using global resources and tools as per the [FPCC Program Guidance](#).
- 10) Strengthening regional partnership through continuous review, commitments and caucusing facilitated by UNICEF ROSA, ACRP and FBO groups.



## 2.0 Context Setting

The Forum was convened as an opportunity to transform the commitments made in the [December 8<sup>th</sup> 2021 High-Level Meeting for Faith Engagement in South Asia](#). It was noted that Faith Communities continued to play the role of first responders in humanitarian situations and more especially during the COVID-19 crisis. This called on the need for continuous collaboration, skills and capacity improvement and building an evidence base of what works. The Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP) gave examples of practical actions and commitments by religious leaders in challenging harmful norms and practices from both a faith and cultural perspective. The collaboration within FPCC therefore allows interrogation of issues using science and evidence as a basis of analysis and engagement.

UNICEF ROSA [highlighted the regional priorities for children](#) and noted the important role faith actors and communities continue to play especially in influencing beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and practices of the communities they represent. UNICEF ROSA has had a consistent relationship and history with faith actors in the past and therefore the Forum will help build a more strategic and sustainable engagement opportunity to influence positive social and behavioral change towards improvement of the well-being of girls, boys, women, men, and families, particularly the most marginalized. The UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia made the commitment to continue to play the role of convener, facilitator and supporter for advancing the regional initiative on FPCC, so that promotion of child rights through faith engagement becomes stronger and more effective.

### 2.1 Objective and Agenda

The Forum was convened to achieve the following: To develop a Regional Faith Engagement Strategy and action plan to be operationalized in the 8 countries in the Region (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka); to formalize a Regional Advisory Group of Faith Actors in South Asia; to support mapping of existing faith engagement work of different organizations in the region to facilitate strengthened collaboration between religious leaders, faith-based organizations and international organizations to advance child rights and to prepare establishment of Multi-Faith Action Committees for Children, Families and Communities (MFACCs) in selected countries as a mechanism for on-going tripartite planning and implementation.

### 2.2 Why Faith Engagement in South Asia

[Religious/Faith engagement](#) was noted to range in scale from small, informal meetings between faith and international actors, to large-scale, multi-million dollar programmes, but also from social movements led by women and youth to convening of high level formal religious leaders. JLI shared that there is increased evidence of the role and impact of faith actors in achieving the SDGs, and there have also been an increased number of broader faith engagement convening, but there is still a need to generate evidence on religious engagement strategies themselves, as many of these strategies have not been institutionalized.

JLI presented a report from a recent study that highlighted six key areas in faith engagement that need attention and focus and should form the basis of Faith Engagement in South Asia. These are:

Coordination and Integration: too many of the current engagements are unsystematic, uncoordinated, and duplicative; Transactional vs. Substantial and Relational: Religious engagements have become a “transactional commodity,” which risks antagonistic partnerships. Faith actors are often instrumentalized for their reach and networks, trusted relationships and social capital, with little reciprocity in shared planning and design of interventions; Global Policy Convening versus More Concerted National and Regional Programming: global convening tend towards more abstract discussion and lack nuance about the contextual and programme-specific reality of religious engagement; Evidence of religious engagement impact: there is a growing body of evidence on the role of faith actors in

development, but there is a lack of evidence on how religious engagements from international actors have worked or not worked; Inclusion and Representation: too often religious engagement is only with high-level religious leaders in or only the most prominent FBOs; Ideological Divides: while ideological differences can create very real barriers, efforts to understand, overcome, or positively engage differences are not very visible. Staff are left to deal with tricky conversations without guidance, which can lead to errors and deepening divides.

### **2.3 Principles of Faith Engagement**

The Forum therefore sought to put together a plan for strategic religious/faith engagement within regional programming strategies and plans for a country, rather than being added on as an extra that is not well integrated into other priorities. The Regional Advisory Group for South Asia will therefore be a practical step towards converting the ideas into action. This engagement will be guided by [the 8 FPCC Principles of Faith Engagement](#) as discussed on section 1.1 of the meeting proceedings and presentation.

### **3.0 Why The Faith for Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities Initiative (FPCC)?**

[The FPCC initiative](#) started in 2014 when UNICEF conducted a mapping of engagement with religious communities which highlighted the need for more strategic and systematic partnership with faith. At the time, almost every one of the 125 UNICEF Country Offices surveyed was somehow engaged in work with faith, but it was mostly single faith, single sector, ad hoc/short term, message-based vs deeper more participatory co-created relationships. Another mapping in 2018 showed that less than half partnerships with faith actors were formalized through Cooperation Agreements. Following that second mapping in 2018, partnership for a new way of working was discussed in a global meeting amongst UNICEF COs across all regions, along with a wide range of multi-faith actors and a global partnership was established between UNICEF, *Religions for Peace* and the Joint Learning Initiative JLI.

FPCC therefore seeks three main outcomes in ROSA: Improved partnership and coordination among different stakeholders, entrenching the [Mind and Heart Dialogue methodology](#) as an approach to understand, bring together, mobilise and work with partners on children issues and finally guarantee positive behavioral outcomes that deliver results for children, families and communities. See more under Annex 1: Meeting Proceedings (1. What is FPCC – History, Background and Benchmarks?)

### **3.1 Plenary feedback and recommendations**

Key issues and recommendation that were brought forward/suggested with regards to the presentations included the need for more inclusive representation based on the diverse faith and cultural context in South Asia. Capacity and knowledge gaps on not only the nature and need for collaborative engagement but also training needs and strategies of integrating the Mind and Heart approach in various contexts. There was concern on how to approach issues considered sensitive especially in a multi-religious set up with different understanding and interpretation of what child rights and wellbeing should look like.

FPCC was presented as a space in which these conversations can be held with respect and shared understanding on the need to find solutions for children. The planned establishment of the Multi-Faith Action Coordinating Committees (MFACCs) as platforms within which to interrogate and co-create solutions that listen to the voices of children, draw inspiration from faith teachings and values and continuously promote feedback and engagement platforms to analyse evidence and design context specific interventions.

### **4.0 Gender Analysis: Disparities within ROSA Countries**

The conversation on gender analysis and disparities was as a result of presentations made by UNICEF ROSA. It was emphasized that data collection, analysis and sharing is important to ensure success and

impact of any inactive. The three main challenges a child can face in South Asia are: Inequalities in access to care; increasing child insecurity; and access to education and healthcare.

Data on school attendance in South Asia showed that not all children make it to school, of those making it to school, many do not attend; and then many don't transition from primary school to secondary school.

Data on the youth Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs) showed that there are high disparities between boys and girls, girls are usually the most affected. Data on child marriage shows that there are: High rates of child marriages in the region with disparities between countries and this also has implication on the health of girls where a high rate of girls are still getting married before the age of 15 years. Bangladesh for example had the highest percentage with 66% of the girls getting married under the age of 18 years and 15% of those being under 15 years. [See more on the presentation by UNICEF ROSA.](#)

### **5.0 National Consultations conducted by Religions for Peace Chapters in South Asia**

In April and May, Religions for Peace national chapters also known as Interreligious Councils, held national consultations in 5 countries – Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. A total of approximately 170 religious leaders, including women of faith and youth participated in these consultations. Among the religions represented in these consultations were Bahais, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Muslims and Sikhs.

Discussions were held on the current situation of child rights and wellbeing within their respective country and identifying opportunities, gaps and recommendations for sustained faith engagement and collaborations. This entailed interactive sessions on what are the key challenges, what and who are addressing them, what is further needed for effective response, etc.

Some of the key areas that were identified and discussed were related to the following (am just going to through a quick laundry list of issues that the participants highlighted needing to be addressed): Child marriage, Access to education particularly for girls (within this also a need to discuss subjects that are normally not touched upon such as menstrual hygiene and early pregnancy that prevent many girls from going to school). Also highlighted was the need to have value-based education with inclusion of parents in such programs.

There were a few other issues that were highlighted as being exacerbated by the pandemic. One in particular was singled out and that was **online schooling and the digital divide**. It was clearly seen and many children from poor and rural families dropped out of school. However, increased use of the internet for those who have it also resulted in online exploitation of children. The lockdown also saw an increase in violence at home and mental health issues. Another area that was discussed was the access, and affordability of vaccines as well as the need to counter misinformation, disinformation, misunderstanding and suspicion regarding the efficacy of vaccination.

Recommendations from faith leaders for the Regional Faith Engagement Strategy included: Creating, strengthening and sustaining a safe and protected environment for children; Building the capacity of faith leaders and equipping them with resources to enable them to tackle the issues identifies; Enhancing the engagement of women of faith and youth; Raising awareness among the families and communities on the issues and what can be done; Advocating for policy change, and enforcement of laws; Strengthening social and transitional media presence to highlight the issue, successes, lessons learned, etc and Fostering robust cooperation, coordination, collaboration among and between various entities. Basically enhancing multi-religious and multi-sectoral partnership, including with government and media



### 5.1 Plenary recommendation on Regional Focus/Priority Issues

Additional issues stressed from the plenary feedback sessions included need to address issues relating to; Children in conflict with the law, Internet and social media depriving children of their childhood and its psychological impacts, Rise of hate speech in public spaces, Psychosocial care for children, Education, Sexual and reproductive health, Nutrition, Awareness on good parenting/moral education, Children in conflicts, abandoned, trafficked, refugees, child soldiers, street children, Child slavery and child labour, Physical and sexual abuse, Rumors on vaccination, Children in the care of religious institutions and Drug abuse.

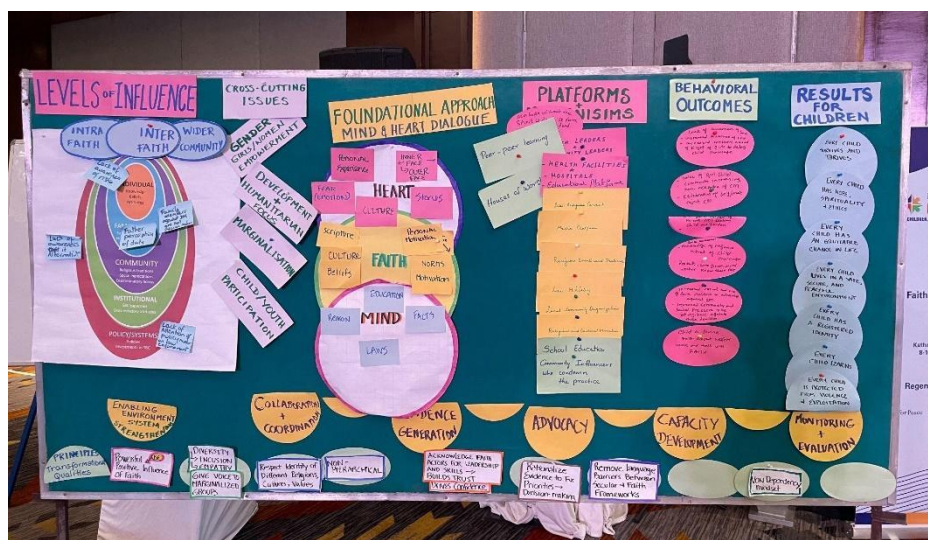
Based on the comprehensive list of issues affecting children, the plenary agreed to the following priorities for Regional focus of FPCC: Promoting positive parenting practices, Preventing Gender-Based Discrimination and Abuse (including Child Marriage and FGM), Child safety, security and safeguarding, Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing and integrating Ethics, Morals, Values and Respectful Communication practices.

## 6.0 South Asia Journey of Change and Outcomes for Children

Building on the Global Social and Behavioral Theory of Change approach that examines the role of faith in development, the Forum was taken through practical activities and exercises to develop the Journey of Change. This built on the methodology that used the issue of Child Marriage to facilitate a process of engagement and feedback in analysis. [The Journey of Change approach and methodology is explained here.](#)

Co-developing a Journey of Change around a specific challenge is an important part of a comprehensive and joint Mind-Heart Dialogue activity that can be coordinated by FPCC partners. It is important for faith actors to analyze the issue systematically and plan together the journey that faith and development partners will need to take together to ensure that change is facilitated in a systematic, at scale, and sustained and effective manner.

From the activities, the following were identified as the desired behavioral outcomes for children: Increased awareness of the laws, on girls rights; Increased value of the child for parents and communities, every child is important (both girls and boys) and are not over-burdened; Caregivers know and are confident in their role; Increased use of multiple faith platforms; Increased community and social pressure against harmful social norms and Walking the talk with faith. Details on the exercises are found in ***Annex 1 under Journey of Change section.***



## 7.0 Roll Out Actions

FPCC Mind Heart Dialogue approach was presented as a reflective and experiential learning process with a more meaningful way to approach faith engagement to catalyze meaningful social and behavioral change. It pierces beneath the surface to expose genuine doubts, tensions and motivations and equips us to respond effectively to gaps we have identified or issues our faith groups and organizations need to address within a safe and shared space of influence.

To enable effective integration and understanding of the Mind and Heart approach, the main strategy for ROSA will include: Adapting every guide/material developed in FPCC has to the specific contexts and identified priority issues; develop and train Mind Heart facilitators with essential qualities and skills; have a master cohort that will be trained by one (or more) training institute(s) from the region; There will also be a national training team (drawn from the MFACCs) to rolling out the training at national level.

The roll-out will draw from lessons learnt in other regions which include: Need to align Mind Heart facilitation trainings with launch of MFACCs, the two should be concurrent, as MFACCs need to guide the priorities and rollout of the training, and training should be accountable to a plan; One round of training in facilitation skills is not enough to master the capacity to link Mind Heart Dialogue with measurable behavioral outcomes. At least two Training of Facilitators is necessary; For sustainability, there is a need to invest in an established regional training entity to build regional capacity and provide support/mentoring to national training teams for MEAL on Mind Heart Dialogue capacity; Need to stay focused on Mind Heart Dialogues that support evidence-based practice, relate to established priorities of MFACCs, Mind Heart facilitation teams, and build mutual learning and reciprocity across platforms of learning, diversity and dialogue; Tip: There needs to be patience not to try to cover many technical areas at the beginning.

## 8.0 List of Annexes (Double Click the Icon below) or see [here](#)



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