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ISSUE BRIEF

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND COMMUNITIES IN DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS IN ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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Yemeni and Egyptian participants in religious leader peer-exchange training.

Religious leaders are trusted and respected in communities throughout the world. In many parts of Asia and the Middle East, people turn to them for guidance on family and personal matters, including decisions about health, education, livelihoods, and roles in civic society. Religious leaders, along with their well-established networks of volunteers and community groups, have the potential to promote and sustain positive changes in the social norms, attitudes, and behaviors that affect development.

USAID aims to engage religious leaders as *practicing development actors* who can provide substantive input on strategy, priorities, and

implementation of development objectives in the communities they serve. Consistent, respectful engagement has the potential to facilitate greater partnership, as well as ownership of a community's own development.

Effective engagement means listening to these leaders' experiences and expertise, and cultivating relationships that are nurtured between and beyond projects and programs.

The purpose of this issue brief is to highlight programs – those funded by USAID as well as those supported by other donors – that successfully collaborate with and build the capacity of religious leaders in shaping and providing sustainable development assistance.

NOTE: Religious leaders, for the purposes of this brief, are defined as women and men who formally and informally reach community members through their roles as leaders, gatekeepers, teachers, and advocates. The role and impact of religious leaders, actors, and institutions varies and is to be understood within each cultural context.

Religious Leaders' Engagement in Development Programming: Healthy Families

Collaborating with religious leaders has proved instrumental in promoting healthy families in Afghanistan. Under the **Accelerating Contraceptive Use (ACU)** project (2005–2006), funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and managed by Management Sciences for Health, contraceptive prevalence more than doubled in three rural districts (and in one of them nearly quadrupled) in one year. With greater understanding and practice of healthy family sizes, it is estimated that the project prevented about one-quarter of projected maternal deaths.

To create positive images of family planning and promote sustainability, religious leaders cooperating with the project reviewed and approved each ACU intervention, educated the community, and advocated culturally acceptable contraceptive use on national television. Through regular visits to project sites, meetings, and homes, religious leaders and community health committees were able to help develop trust and ascertain the level of acceptance within communities.

With mullahs and other community leaders providing solid support for family planning in the religious and social contexts, the project generated clear messages consistent with Islamic teachings. For example, to encourage breastfeeding as a contraceptive technique, the community health workers (CHWs) deployed by the Ministry of Public Health distributed brochures that included the following quote from the Koran:

Mothers shall suckle their children two full years for those who wish to complete breastfeeding.
(Chapter 2, Verse 223)

Verses in the Koran, identified and quoted by religious leaders, were also used to raise awareness of risks, with frequent births presented as a preventable risk to the lives of women and children.

Concerns about contraception were often related not to religion, but to misunderstandings about safety. To counter the common myth, for example, that pills and injectable contraceptives cause infertility, a “Myths and Reality” pamphlet was disseminated to 2,400 health providers.

From 2005 to 2006, use of family planning methods increased dramatically in the project areas. The need for such increases is urgent – with one in seven women dying from pregnancy and childbirth in Afghanistan, one of the fastest, easiest ways to prevent maternal deaths is with the healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies through use of family planning methods. Appropriate birth spacing can also lead to improved infant and child health outcomes, such as better growth, reductions in infant and child deaths, and an increase in the number of children surviving to age 5.

The ACU model is now being scaled up nationwide through the USAID-supported **Technical Support to the Central and Provincial Ministry of Public Health (Tech-Serve)** project (2006–2010), which continues to collaborate with the national government and religious and community leaders to create culturally appropriate contraceptive information and health messages for dissemination to the public and health professionals. A training manual for religious leaders is being developed to integrate information on birth spacing and contraceptive use. The project also advocates strengthening health services through CHWs in order to make healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies easy and simple for Afghan providers and clients.

Expanding and Enhancing Access to Health Services

Nearly all countries in Asia and the Middle East have made great progress in improving maternal and child health outcomes. Certain countries, such as Yemen and Afghanistan, however, still have unhealthy birth spacing and fertility rates as well as high infant and maternal mortality. Reaching out to communities through religious leaders about the importance of health care is particularly critical in an area like reproductive health and family planning (RH/FP), where health science intersects with religion, culture, and morality.

Working in **Yemen, Bangladesh, and Pakistan**, the USAID-supported Extended Services Delivery project builds the capacity of religious leaders to act as change agents in increasing community acceptance of and commitment to RH/FP programs and services. By providing gender- and culture-sensitive training in RH/FP issues to female and male local Islamic leaders, the project helps to address unmet family planning needs and increases the use of RH/FP services at the community level. The training focuses on family health issues, and is specifically designed to help dispel the stereotype that family planning is a Western method to control Muslim populations. Trainers, through dialogue and interaction with religious leaders, convey the message that family planning is a way to ensure the healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies, ensuring optimal health for the mother and child.

With such great influence, the active support of religious leaders plays a key role in the successful outreach to individuals, families, and communities.

In the training, religious leaders interact with explanations of how Koranic principles are consistent with RH/FP. The training enables participants to discuss various key topics, such as health procedures that help women and girls

throughout their reproductive lives; the benefits of birth spacing for women, husbands, infants, families, and society; various family planning methods; sexually transmitted infection prevention, symptoms, and treatment; and the unacceptability of violence against women. The peer-exchange component of the project facilitates exchanges between trained religious leaders and their counterparts. These exchanges provide a culturally appropriate transfer of knowledge on community health issues and strategies for involving religious leaders in development.

The USAID Takamol project, implemented in **Egypt** through Pathfinder International, works with female and male Muslim and Christian religious leaders to convey maternal and child health and RH/FP messages within their local communities. Takamol trains religious leaders on issues such as family planning methods and birth spacing; the risks associated with early marriage, early childbearing, and female genital cutting; the benefits of breastfeeding, antenatal, postnatal, and postabortion care; and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections. Religious leaders are trained in how best to communicate with youth, men, and newlyweds. The training enables them to deliver messages, enhanced by relevant verses from religious texts that they themselves identify, in individualized counseling sessions and to large audiences at sermons and public meetings.

In **Bangladesh**, the USAID Smiling Sun Franchise program, implemented by Chemonics, is maintaining and expanding the availability of sustainable nongovernmental organization (NGO) clinics. The project works with imams to increase community use of health services and products. Community imams have been involved in the design and implementation of the project, including in the development of culturally sensitive messages and materials. Religious leaders' support of the clinics is essential, since they help to engender support from men in the community, which leads to increased access for women. The imams have allowed the NGO clinics to use mosque loudspeakers to broadcast dates of special events and services available at the Smiling Sun satellite clinics.

In **Uzbekistan**, the USAID-supported Healthy Family project, implemented by Project Hope, worked with *mahallas* (collections of neighborhoods) to identify representatives to facilitate community mobilization on health. Elders and imams were among those who received training and support from the project. These leaders used their skills and

resources to work with existing community committees to initiate health education activities, including home visits, community theater, and other events.

Muhammadiyah, based in **Indonesia**, is the oldest and largest Islamic social welfare organization in the world. Highly respected by communities, the Indonesian government, and international organizations, Muhammadiyah works closely with its associated yet autonomous women's organization Aisyiah, the first major Islamic women's social activist organization. USAID has worked with both organizations to provide crucial family health services, including family planning and maternal health services.

Reaching Communities with Messages on Infectious Diseases

In Asia, where HIV/AIDS infection rates are much lower than in Africa but where absolute numbers are substantial, HIV causes a greater loss of productivity than any other disease. Asia has the highest burden of tuberculosis (TB) globally and is experiencing a rise in the most drug-resistant forms of TB. Avian influenza, pandemic influenza, and the H1N1 virus represent ongoing concerns for Asia and the Middle East. Asia has suffered the highest number of known human cases and deaths from avian influenza, and Egypt has one of the highest burdens of avian influenza worldwide.

Religious leaders can be extremely influential in efforts to eliminate stigma and discrimination and to promote tolerance and community-based support for people affected by infectious diseases like TB and HIV. According to the United Nations Development Programme, the key to change is to involve religious leaders who are respected role models and who have the leadership power to openly encourage positive behaviors and change community norms on issues such as use of mosquito nets to prevent malaria, good hygiene practices to prevent the transmission of water- and food-borne diseases, and testing for HIV and TB.

In **Indonesia**, members of the grassroots Islamic organization Muhammadiyah, in collaboration with the Indonesian Red Cross (Palang Merah Indonesia), are serving as village avian influenza coordinators (VAICs). VAICs have provided training for schoolteachers on risks, prevention methods, and the role of communities in preventing avian influenza transmission and monitoring for potential outbreaks. In addition, Muhammadiyah is promoting outreach to small-scale “backyard” farmers, including efforts to encourage the use of poultry cages to help limit the possibility of flocks mingling with infected birds.

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The USAID-supported Khmer HIV/AIDS NGO Alliance is supporting Buddhism for Development (BFD), which builds on **Cambodia's** cultural and religious traditions to address major development challenges. Much of BFD's work is based on its six-week “Peace Development School” in which monks learn about health care and HIV/AIDS, community participation, vocational training, and agricultural extension methods. Of the more than 1,100 monks who have completed the training so far, many have returned to their home villages and have established HIV/AIDS associations that now carry out HIV prevention services, home-based care, and direct care for children who have been affected by HIV/AIDS. As members of home care teams, which include government and NGO workers and local volunteers, the monks also help to provide basic medical care and psychosocial support and refer those living with HIV/AIDS to other services such as testing for TB. The monks also work in self-help groups that incorporate Buddhist teaching, meditation, and prayer as stress-relieving strategies.

Similarly, Progressio, a charity sponsored by the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID), is providing focused training to imams and *khutabas* (those designated to give Friday sermons) in **Yemen** to discuss HIV/AIDS from a religious perspective and to examine religious leaders' roles in reducing stigma and discrimination. HIV/AIDS remains a controversial subject in the country, and a lack of awareness and education make it a high-risk

place for infection. Discrimination and fear of other societal consequences discourage many people from disclosing their HIV-positive status. In a place where faith informs most aspects of daily life, the views of religious leaders are particularly important. The training workshops focus on Islam’s messages of love, peace, and respecting the rights of others, including people who are HIV positive.

With UNICEF support, the Buddhist Leadership Initiative, implemented in East Asia and the Pacific Islands/Oceania, promotes the role of religious leaders in community responses to HIV/AIDS. At the Dashchoiling Buddhist monastery in **Mongolia**, for example, the Buddhist Leadership Initiative is supporting the lamas’ discussion of the issues that are confronting community members and their development of strategies for community members to cope effectively with the disease. The Buddhist Leadership Initiative is currently working to increase lamas’ involvement in HIV/AIDS prevention by building their ability to advocate for and lead communities in responding to HIV/AIDS, focusing in particular on young people.

Promoting Access to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation Services

As in other sectors, religious leaders can help galvanize communities to take positive actions in the areas of sanitation and drinking water supply, issues at the heart of health and economic development. Efforts to accelerate access to sanitation and to achieve universal access to clean drinking water are particularly important in South Asia, where sanitation coverage remains very low, at just 33 percent of the population. As a result of poor sanitation, many still suffer from the consequences of drinking unsafe water, such as acute diarrhea, which kills millions of young children every year. In general, the Middle Eastern countries have better access to appropriate sanitation and clean water; however, they experience chronic water shortages.

In **Jordan**, the Water Efficiency and Public Information for Action (WEPIA) program, supported by USAID and the Academy for Educational Development, worked with a coalition of representatives from all segments of society, including religious leaders, to develop messages to increase community understanding and use of water-saving devices and other water efficiency measures. WEPIA organized informal training for half of Jordan’s 4,000 religious leaders, and an additional 1,000 male and female religious leaders received intensive formal training on water resources and conservation, using materials such as the Imam Training Guide, which was developed by WEPIA in collaboration with imams and *waethat* (female lay religious leaders). The leaders researched the Koran for *suras* (verses) related to water conservation, and they also provided insights into the religious sector’s concerns about the project. Articles on water conservation were placed in the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs journal *Hadi Al-Islam*, which reaches all religious leaders in Jordan. Imams also included messages on water conservation in their sermons. The project helped to spur major reductions in residential, commercial, and public sector water consumption.

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Paengajian As-Salaam, a Muslim women’s prayer group in north Jakarta, **Indonesia**, is one of USAID’s partners in supporting the promotion and distribution of Air RahMat, a solution that purifies water for drinking. In the Indonesian language, *air*

means water and *rahmat* means blessing, hence the blended name, Air RahMat, or “blessed water.” Leaders of the women’s prayer group provide demonstrations on using the product and personal testimonials regarding their own families’ use of the treatment. With more than 100 million Indonesians lacking access to safe drinking water, the product is a critical addition to help protect children from diarrhea, the second leading cause of death among children under five.

In **Indonesia**, religious leaders have helped develop and implement a hygiene and health project supported by USAID, Institut Agama Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry (Ar-Raniry State Islamic Religion Institute), CARE International, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, and Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs. Religious leaders were instrumental in crafting health messages that are positively linked to Koranic verses and Islamic teachings, such as Islamic texts on basic hygiene and personal cleanliness. *Ulama* (religious leaders) that are involved in the project are committed to spreading these behavior change messages in their communities through their Friday prayers, community meetings, and other speeches.

Strengthening Democracy, Governance, and Civic Education

Between 1990 and 2007, Asia and the Middle East have experienced mixed results in improving political rights and civil liberties. According to the 2008 Freedom in the World report, which monitors trends in democracy worldwide and tracks achievements and setbacks, a number of countries have made improvements in political freedom, including Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Mongolia, and Indonesia. Political freedom has deteriorated to a greater or lesser extent over this same time period in countries such as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Thailand, Egypt, and West Bank/Gaza. Democratic governance depends on establishing mechanisms for citizen participation in government decision making. Citizen participation, including the participation of local religious leaders in local councils, committees, and initiatives, can ultimately help improve government accountability.

USAID has partnered with Muhammadiyah and Aisyiah to advance the ongoing process citizen participation in **Indonesia**. Both organizations promote as Islamic values the principles of democratic pluralism, nonviolent conflict resolution, religious tolerance, gender equity, intercommunity reconciliation, and interfaith dialogue. USAID also has supported Muhammadiyah's participation in the People's Voter Education Network, a network of 31 Muslim, Christian, interfaith, and secular NGOs. Muhammadiyah is also active in institutionalizing civic education in its Islamic universities and high schools.

In **Bangladesh**, USAID is working with the Asia Foundation to implement the Leaders of Influence (LOI) program, which provides religious and other community leaders with training in national development goals and the values of democratic

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governance, tolerance, and understanding, which are essential to achieving these goals. Over four years, the LOI program will work with 20,000 leaders to enhance participants' abilities to share development knowledge and serve as catalysts for community development activities. LOI also assists leaders in establishing collaborative working relations with other religious and secular leaders in Bangladesh and other South and Southeast Asian countries. LOI builds on the experience of the earlier Leaders Outreach Initiative program, which provided more than 5,000 imams the opportunity to study community development initiatives in education, human rights, public health, agriculture, fisheries, environmental conservation, and enterprise development.

In partnership with the Islamic Institute of Osh, a *madrassa* (Islamic school) in **Kyrgyzstan**, a USAID-supported street law program has enabled students to learn about religious rights and tolerance, democracy and the law, social norms, and constitutional and criminal law. The street law program, with law students from a local university, conducted lessons for groups of girls and boys in separate classrooms. Since 2006, the program has expanded to 10 *madrassas*, two Islamic institutes, and one religious NGO that serves women. Thirty teachers have been trained on interactive teaching methods and legal content.

With support from DFID, the World Bank's Access to Justice in Aceh program in **Indonesia** works in partnership with government and civil society, including religious leaders, to improve legal awareness and legal education,

strengthen dispute resolution at the community level, and strengthen the capacity of the legal system to deliver justice for the poor and marginalized. A strong focus is on women's legal empowerment, as women have suffered disproportionately as a result of the tsunami and conflict in Indonesia.

Conserving Natural Resources

Intact ecosystems are not only essential for maintaining biodiversity, but also for providing food security. When land is deforested for intensive agricultural use, soil erosion often follows. When destructive fishing practices are permitted, coral reefs are destroyed, and barren seas are left behind. While the practices yield short-term gain, they deplete food sources in the longer term unless sustainable management practices are implemented. This situation is further compounded by high population growth in areas surrounding these ecosystems. Simply passing laws to protect forests is not enough; residents affected by the laws need to fully understand their benefits. Otherwise, the legislation, like other legislation requiring people to change the way they gather food and fuel, ends up being difficult to enforce.

To regulate the responsible use of forests and land, religion and local culture were integrated into a recent environmental law in the **Philippines** called the Muslim Mindanao Sustainable Forest Management Act. The law represented a landmark in the history of forest management in the Philippines because of the participatory process in which USAID, in partnership with DAI, worked closely with the government of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, local government units, Muslim legal specialists, social scientists, and community leaders. The legislation drew from principles rooted in Islamic and customary laws, as well as community-based management approaches. As a result, local communities have been empowered to address the destruction and degradation of forests while permitting those most dependent on the forest for their basic needs to use its resources in a responsible manner.

Muslim religious leaders in **Indonesia** are increasingly supporting conservation efforts. In 2006, the Indonesian government signed a five-year forest conservation agreement with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Muslim group. The agreement is an opportunity to raise awareness and teach modern forestry and conservation issues to NU leaders and encourage members to become active conservationists and help rehabilitate Indonesia's 59 million hectares of deforested land. Raising awareness and teaching forestry and conservation issues through religious institutions is also supported by the World Bank and Conservation International. As NU chairman Hasyim Muzadi says, "Conserving nature is one of God's orders and part of our religious teachings."

Enhancing Education

A better educated population paves the path for a variety of improved development outcomes, including a healthier population with increased economic opportunities. Increasing participation, gender equity, and education quality remain substantial challenges. Most countries in Asia and the Middle East have increased their net female primary school enrollment rates since 1990. However, girls' relatively low enrollment in secondary school remains a critical concern for many countries.

In **India**, the Muslim population suffers from poor school enrollment, attendance, and completion, all of which are far below national averages. In partnership with the Muslim community, local religious leaders, the CAP Foundation, and the Andhra Pradesh government, USAID supports programming that provides quality formal education, in conjunction with religious education, in Andhra Pradesh *madrassas*. Religious leaders participate in training and discussions with Islamic scholars who lecture from the Koran on the necessity of quality education for creating positive change in peoples' lives. *Madrassa* leaders and teachers have participated in USAID training on how to introduce activity-based teaching/learning methodologies in

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the *madrassas*. Workbooks were developed with active participation of the *madrassa* leaders and were distributed to students. The personal involvement of several leaders, both in calling upon communities to educate their children and in taking part in teaching formal subjects to the *madrassa* children, especially girls, is very encouraging. In partnership with the state government, more than 500 *madrassas* now provide formal education to 48,000 children, about half of them girls. The religious leaders also support older students' preparation for employment through vocational, computer, and life skills education.

At 94 percent, **Thailand** has one of the higher primary school enrollment rates in the East Asia and Pacific regions. Srinakharinwirot University in Thailand, with support from the World Bank's Decentralized School-Based Management project, organized a five-day training for 24 Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic religious leaders on education reform. The training created a forum for stakeholders to explore their roles in education and administration and to learn more from other religious perspectives. A key area to address in Thailand is girls' continuation to secondary school: just 72 percent of girls make this transition.

Strengthening Economies

While many of the countries in Asia and the Middle East have experienced strong economic growth since 1990, there is much variation across the regions, with tremendous growth in the "tiger economies" of East Asia but a decrease in the gross domestic products of Central Asian nations as they transitioned from communism. Religious leaders play a vital role in contributing to economic growth, particularly through participation in programs that address inequalities within countries.

In **Afghanistan**, USAID and the World Council of Credit Unions are supporting Islamic investment and finance cooperatives, which are working with religious leaders to confirm that the cooperatives' financial services are legitimate and compliant with *sharia* (Islamic law). Letters from local religious authorities strengthen the trust between the cooperatives and their members, which increases the effectiveness of economic growth activities. Financial services include small business and cooperative group loans, individual and business development savings accounts, agriculture equipment leasing, debt consolidation loans, and deposits.

The World Bank's Kecamatan Development Project in **Indonesia** provides block grants to select *kecamatan*s (subdistricts), which then distribute the funds to villages. Grant distribution occurs after extensive information dissemination, community facilitation, and outreach, and the process works best when religious leaders work closely with the project. Proposals are written, committees are formed, and projects are selected and implemented – all within a year. As a result of the project, local people are directly involved in making their own choices about development, whether it be to use grant funds to build a social good, such as roads, or whether to use the money as individual revolving funds, with money to be paid back with interest.