

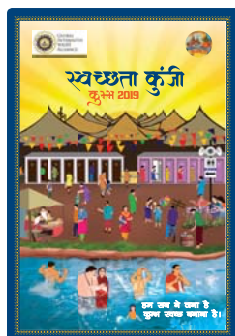
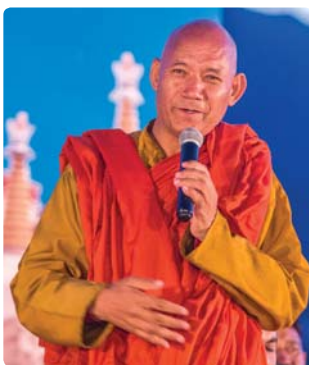
Faith Based Engagements

A GUIDANCE NOTE



Introduction

Development practitioners and policy makers have long recognized the influential role that diverse community stakeholders play in shaping norms and practices around health and well-being of populations. Critical among these community stakeholders are Faith Leaders (FLs) and Faith Based Organizations (FBOs), who are key in shaping and driving attitudes and behaviours among communities. As a result of the well-established ties with their communities, religious leaders are able to inform and influence the values and practices of the families they serve, and also build a spirit of collaboration and trust among populations. They are well-placed to address inequity and challenge the social factors that drive these. Their access to vast communication and information dissemination networks makes them critical in community mobilization and crisis response. Evidence suggests that FLs are able to influence practice and behaviour not only at an individual level, but also on a larger societal level.





There are multiple facets to the role that faith actors play in engaging with communities, in the process of driving social and behaviour change at scale.



Leadership and influence: FLs are figures of authority in their communities, and can improve acceptance and uptake of positive behaviours among communities. They are also key in advocating for behaviour change among their peers and within their religious institutions. As they are considered role models, they can influence behaviours by modelling optimal practices, and making such behaviours aspirational.



Networking and coordination: Typically, FLs have access to and influence over strong social networks, and can effectively disseminate information and mobilize communities in order to garner support, resources and participation. They are crucial in amplifying messaging, coordinating efforts, promoting adherence to good practices, and facilitating uptake of government services. Religious institutions also typically have access to vast volunteer and media networks.



Trust building and cooperation: Religious institutions and leaders are able to effectively reduce barriers of mistrust, challenge misconceptions and taboos, and influence change among communities. As they are trusted, they have the capacity to challenge cultural values while fostering dialogue and setting common well-being goals for the communities. They can be significant in driving a rights-based approach towards development, which emphasizes equality, non-discrimination, participation and accountability.



Outreach to vulnerable populations: Faith actors are positioned to promote equitable outcomes for the most vulnerable households and communities, and can challenge social factors and norms that drive inequity. As religious institutions are often the primary non-state providers of welfare to vulnerable and at-risk populations (e.g., through nutrition, shelter, sanitation and hygiene initiatives), they are key contact points of such communities, and can facilitate outreach and linkages to the most disadvantaged populations. FLs are also essential in advocating for improved service provision and support to vulnerable populations.



Emotional and spiritual support: FLs are deeply trusted by their communities and are often called upon to provide psychosocial support and counselling to their congregations. They can be pivotal in allaying fears and anxieties, countering stigma and discrimination, and facilitating cooperation and recovery among communities.



Crisis and emergency response: Faith actors' unique access to vast communication channels and reach to large audiences make them valuable players in information dissemination and crisis response. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, FLs amplified messaging on COVID Appropriate Behaviours (CAB), testing procedures, vaccine uptake, etc. through their existing channels and networks. They stressed the need to follow government regulations and guidelines, and to only trust credible government sources of information. By adapting their worship and services to incorporate CAB, and conducting services online, FLs signalled for the need to socially distance, stay at home and follow the protocols required for the prevention of COVID. They were key players in addressing stigma and discrimination, providing outreach and services to communities in need, and using their resources for emergency response.



Conduits of social change: Religious leaders are considered to have tremendous potential to become agents of positive change in their communities. As religious leaders and institutions have more access to the family and personal spheres of households than most outside actors, they serve as an important conduit for social change and transformation. Additionally, FLs engage with their congregations directly and on a regular basis, driving continuous community engagement and potentially bringing about more sustainable behaviour change results. They can leverage their networks to support and advocate for essential practices and behaviours, bring about greater cooperation between communities, and improve critical social and development outcomes.

The UNICEF India Office Faith Based Engagements

UNICEF has a long history of working with FLs/FBOs in India, and has extensively partnered with them at national and sub-national levels for raising awareness, public advocacy, and creating an environment supportive of behaviour change interventions across health, nutrition, WASH, education, child protection and humanitarian programmes. Significant among those are the Health and Polio programmes, WASH, and more recently, COVID-19. UNICEF has also closely engaged with several partners to create and support inter-faith alliances at the national and state levels, such as the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA) India, Inter-faith Humanitarian Alliance, West Bengal Interfaith Alliance for Children, and the Bihar Inter-Faith Forum for Children (BIFFC). These initiatives have helped in bringing actors and organizations together from various religions to inform, motivate and mobilize them in order to promote and activate communities on multiple development issues.



These Strategic Efforts have Primarily Focused on:



Leveraging influence of FLs/FBOs for public advocacy to address negative social norms and create social movements in order to improve the overall well-being of women, children and communities



Creating inclusive inter-faith networks and platforms by bringing together leaders of different faiths on common forums, promoting participation and action by women FLs, and creating networks of tribal leaders in states with high density of tribal populations



Building capacities of FLs/FBOs on key development issues enhancing individual and institutional capacities to conduct peer-to-peer advocacy on these issues, disseminate correct information among their communities, and facilitate opportunities for dialogue and outreach



Creating training and communication content specific to the FL/FBO context to facilitate capacity building and act as support aids for FLs when they conduct outreach or community mobilization



Expanding partnerships and strengthening existing engagements with FLs/FBOs across the country by leveraging their support on priority issues, including health, nutrition, WASH, education, child rights, DRR, COVID-19, climate change and other emerging issues



Harnessing the potential of festivals and fairs to amplify issue-based messaging in order to reach the masses and last-mile populations



Fostering opportunities for FL/FBO participation and operational collaboration with flagship schemes and interventions of the Government of India (national and state level); convening platforms and bringing together government and FLs on a common platform



Consolidating the evidence base on the role of FLs/FBOs in facilitating demand generation, behaviour and social change, and modalities of working effectively with them



Purpose of the Guidance Note

This document aims to serve as a guidance note for development sector actors engaging with FLs/FBOs in effectively reaching communities and mobilizing action around development issues. Using insights gathered from a review of existing literature and extensive consultations with state offices and key stakeholders, this note has been developed as a resource to aid FL/FBO engagement as India Country Office (ICO) moves into a new country programme in 2023 to address critical development issues.

A twofold process was employed to develop this guidance note:

Evidence review: A brief review of key guidance documents on faith engagement was conducted globally by UNICEF and other organizations. Insights were drawn on how faith actors can be engaged optimally, the critical processes before initiating partnerships, diverse engagement modalities with FLs/FBOs, and the main challenges in ensuring partnerships and working with them.

Analysing UNICEF's state level engagements: A comprehensive mapping exercise was conducted to understand the various modalities of FL/FBO engagement by 12 UNICEF State Offices (Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Bihar, Telangana/Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Kerala/Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh). Focusing on the 2020–2022 period, UNICEF's strategies for faith actor engagement were documented through online consultations and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with UNICEF state focal points. A discussion tool was developed to collect standardized data from states, which explored four major intervention areas: engagement type, coverage, activities undertaken, and future plans. This process aimed to glean the main engagement strategies and guidelines being followed in the design and operationalization of faith actor engagement in the states, and understand the resources and tools that are available and required among these stakeholders. A rich diversity was noted in the religious and cultural contexts and actors across the states, with inclusion of faith actors from minority, vulnerable and tribal communities.

State-wise Details of Engagement

State	Dominant work with religious groups								Partnership			Areas of work							
	Christianity	Islam	Buddhism	Hinduism	Tribal	Jainism	Sikhism	Other religions	FBOs	CBO/NGO/CoE	Religious leaders/ Alliance of FLs	Maternal and child health	HIV/AIDS	WASH	Nutrition	Child protection	Education	Disaster risk reduction	COVID-19
Andhra Pradesh & Telangana	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assam	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
Bihar	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		✓				✓
Chhattisgarh	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
Gujarat	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓								✓
Jharkhand	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓								✓
Kerala	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Madhya Pradesh	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓				✓
Maharashtra	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
Rajasthan	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓								✓
Uttar Pradesh	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓				✓
West Bengal	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			✓		✓	✓	✓			✓
Total	12	12	12	12	4	10	10	4	7	7	8	11	4	3	3	9	5	3	12



Models of FBO Engagement

The consultations and findings show some key sustainable models of FL/FBO engagement.

UNICEF Supports Creating Self-sustaining Local Multi-faith Committees



UNICEF has worked with partner organizations to establish and promote local networks of faith actors while providing these networks with financial and organizational support. Over a period of time, such networks gradually strengthened in capacities and were empowered to develop their own secretariat or core committees, take charge of the community mobilization activities, create a participatory process of information-sharing, strategy-building, and resource mobilization. The BIFFC, established in 2017, is one such example. It was directly supported by UNICEF and a partner NGO for two years. Since 2020, BIFFC has established a core group of leaders and has been

working independently on developing its outreach activities across sectors, facilitating dialogue between FLs and bringing together diverse faith actors on a common platform.

UNICEF Acts as Catalyst in Promoting Partnership between Governments and Faith Actors

UNICEF's credentials as a convenor and its experience in facilitating collaborations between government and non-government stakeholders have brought together different actors on common platforms and created understanding. NITI Aayog sought UNICEF's support in 25 of the 117 Aspirational Districts (ADs) to address gaps in immunization, exclusive breastfeeding, institutional deliveries, and sanitation and hygiene, by working with FLs as influencers. UNICEF, as the technical and knowledge partner, supported mapping the FLs/FBOs in these districts, and building their capacities to promote key messages on these critical issues among their peers and constituents.

UNICEF worked closely with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) on COVID-19 Risk Communication and Community engagement strategies. FLs/FBOs were identified as one of the main stakeholders, and their engagement was understood as critical in addressing myths and misinformation regarding COVID-19. They have also been mobilized effectively to tackle COVID-related stigma and discrimination, and reduce hesitancy in vaccine-resistant populations.





In Maharashtra, FLs/FBOs worked with the State IEC Bureau, Department of Health and Government of Maharashtra, in partnership with UNICEF, to tackle stigma and discrimination and promote CAB and COVID-19 vaccination uptake in Dharavi, Mumbai. In the same community, a group of FBOs and youth networks (led by Jamaat-e-Islami Hind; Arc Diocese of Mumbai; Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA); and YRG Care) held a series of capacity development workshops and set up Vaccination Help Desks (VHDs).

Analysis of similar work in other states reveals that by meeting in common forums, state governments and FLs/FBOs are able to identify common issues and challenges, agree upon strategies, and delegate responsibilities and actions to reach common goals.

UNICEF Supports Establishment of National-level Inter-faith Alliances

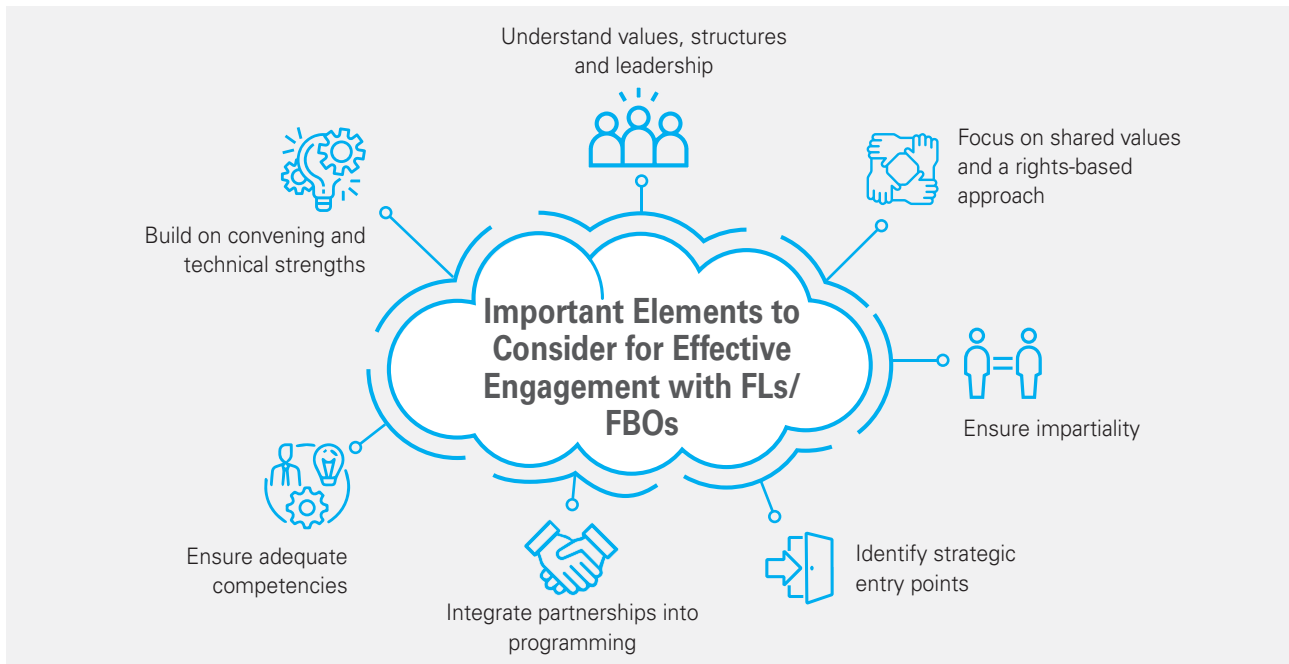
UNICEF and its development partners have strengthened faith actor engagement by facilitating the establishment of international and national alliances of FLs. GIWA was launched globally in 2013 by UNICEF HQ, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Government of the Netherlands, with the aim of creating country-level inter-faith alliances to address key issues of WASH, especially taboo topics such as sanitation. GIWA's India chapter was created with the support of UNICEF in 2014. The focus of the partnership was to ensure that the alliance was viewed as a credible entity. This was done through press launches, summits with state governments, workshops with the media, and networking with various development and private partners. GIWA is currently a self-supporting alliance working with diverse stakeholders. With their influence and wide network, they have convened summits to bring together inter-faith leaders, government officials and political leaders on the same platform to discuss the most significant WASH issues. They have led awareness generation, capacity building and outreach activities among FLs and communities on health, WASH, nutrition, child marriage and climate change. They have also inspired the formation of state-level inter-faith alliances such as the West Bengal Interfaith Alliance and the Assam Interfaith Alliance, both of which are supported by UNICEF in their respective states.

UNICEF and its development partners, along with MoHFW, came together during the first COVID-19 wave to convene a national Interfaith Humanitarian Alliance, mobilizing leaders from across the country to act on COVID-19.





UNICEF's Approach towards FL/FBO Engagement



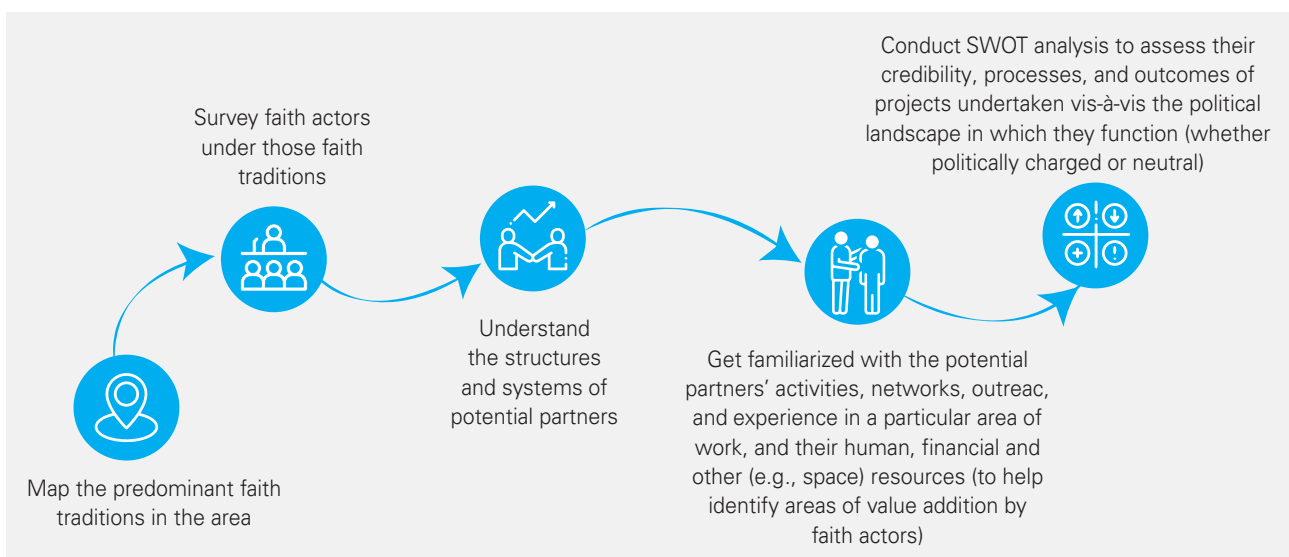
Recommended Strategic Steps for FL/FBO Engagement

Technical support to partnerships: UNICEF's role in FL/FBO engagement is recommended to be that of a facilitator, convener and technical support. Visibility for UNICEF is not a priority on such platforms, since the objective of such a partnership is to leverage influence, outreach and networks.

Gathering Evidence

Before initiating engagement, it is critical to develop a comprehensive understanding of the communities, contexts and the FLs/FBOs. It is essential to gather ground-level data and insights on the demographics, socio-cultural factors, prevalent development challenges and key priorities of communities, especially of the marginalized and vulnerable sections within the population and geography selected.

Steps in Gathering Evidence





Secularity and Inclusiveness

Faith actors must be founded on non-controversial, secular and inclusive principles for social development.

Effectively engaging with faith-based partners calls for an improved appreciation and recognition of the diversity of the religious and social landscape in India. Potential to engage with religious communities may vary given their population size/volume, geographical distribution, capacities and institutions, leadership styles, political leanings and cultural influences. Being aware of these differences and ensuring engagement across all faith groups can drive more targeted and effective engagement.

Important Factors to Ensure while Developing Engagement Strategies with FLs



Building perspectives of FLs around the diversity of faiths and religious practices can also make them ambassadors for open dialogue and promoting goodwill, and help them to play a role in preventing and mediating conflicts based on religious differences.

Addressing existing gaps in the representation of faith actors is significant in developing engagement strategies that reflect the rich diversity of traditions and perspectives that exist in India. Thus, engagement strategies should be developed to ensure that engagement is conducted impartially across leaders and influencers from all faith groups, and especially to represent minority and disadvantaged populations. Similarly, it is important to **improve investment in female FLs**, provide them with more leadership opportunities, and facilitate their participation in decision making and strategizing. Creating a chapter of female FLs and building more formal mechanisms for female FLs to engage with communities and authorities on social issues are examples of improved investment.

Ensure the engagement of unreached and underrepresented FLs, including women FLs is crucial to effectively harness the potential of the FL/FBO community.

Building Capacities of FLs/FBOs and Developing Relevant Communication Tools

As a technical and knowledge partner, it is important to build FLs/FBOs' capacities and equip them with correct information so that they can become valuable resources and contact points for their communities in the context of health and social development.

Considering the unique role that religious leaders and institutions play in driving community behaviours, it is critical to equip them in being effective champions of health, well-being and development practices. Two-way communication and ownership building are essential, with faith actors being called upon to share their insights and lend their support, while also receiving technical inputs to strengthen outreach and messaging.

Creating Opportunities for Dialogue between Faith Actors

This can help to consolidate diverse skills and competencies, pool resources, multiply outreach, exchange knowledge, bring about long-term sustainability, and empower faith networks and alliances.

FLs/FBOs generally have access to vast communication channels, which makes them valuable actors in amplifying messaging, battling misinformation and fake news, and ensuring that communities have access to reliable and accurate information. Improving their competencies around technicalities new mediums/social media for knowledge dissemination will further strengthen their ability to engage their communities and peers.



The right messages to be taken forward can be interwoven into the existing language/programmes of faith, as faith actors are well-versed in using their religious scriptures and techniques to communicate with their followers.

The development of such tools and communication materials should be done in consultation so that they are suitable for use by faith actors.

Advantages of Collaborating with Faith Actors



Leveraging Faith Actors' Credibility and Reach

Collaborations between FLs and institutions, governments and development organizations are necessary in order to strengthen public attitudes and responses around key practices. This can be done in a variety of ways: FLs can promote and model positive behaviours; highlight how these practices are upheld in religious teachings, scriptures and sacred texts; and address distrust among congregations and communities. Identifying scriptural passages and references to validate positive health practices has been seen to result in greater uptake and acceptance around public health messaging. Such leaders can also help restore populations' trust in government systems and institutions, improve the acceptability of services, and encourage service uptake and utilization.

Improving Outreach to the Most Vulnerable and At-risk Populations

To close the last-mile gap and reduce health and social disparities among communities, FLs are vital and uniquely positioned. As religious institutions are often the primary non-state providers of welfare to the vulnerable populations, they are valuable in identifying the needs and priorities of disadvantaged and at-risk groups, for whom they can be strong advocates with the public and relevant authorities.

They can be pivotal in challenging norms around gender inequality and women's access to health care and opportunities. FLs' interpretations of women's roles in the public and household spheres, and the extent to which they promote gender equality and women's empowerment within their traditions, can have an enormous impact on the lives of women and girls in their communities. Creating opportunities for FLs (male and female) to engage with existing women's groups can be critical in signalling and modelling the important role that women play in day-to-day decision making. Similarly, it is important to explore opportunities to invest in youth health and well-being by engaging with existing youth social networks in the faith context. In the long run, the aim is to utilize social networks of FLs to develop response structures and mechanisms that can represent the interests of all religious and minority groups, and to advocate with the local authorities and government structures for these priorities.

Ensuring Regular and Strategic Engagement to Drive Sustainable Behaviour Change

Regular engagement is vital, both with FLs and between FLs/FBOs and their communities, to ensure continued engagement with FL networks and FBOs, e.g., by creating a calendar of religious events and gatherings, developing strategies around how to integrate messaging on essential practices into event planning, utilizing their communication channels at regular intervals to disseminate information, or establishing focal points/liaisons for the main thematic areas. Repeated messaging and regular knowledge sharing will enable information retention by FLs and communities and drive long-term behaviour change. FLs regularly appealing to key service providers (e.g., administrators, government personnel, faith-based volunteers, administrators at events such as Kumbh Mela), can sensitize these individuals on their ethical and moral responsibilities to their communities and improve the quality-of-service provision.



Amplifying Communication and Outreach in Emergency Contexts

FLs are essential as they are able to leverage their vast communication channels, and can sensitize congregations about how religious practices can be sustained while adhering to health and safety guidelines. As individuals, religious leaders can also model positive practices by publicizing their service uptake (e.g., receiving COVID-19 vaccines).

FLs are also crucial in providing supportive psychosocial environments and counselling to their congregations, allaying fears and anxieties among communities, countering stigma and discrimination, upholding the rights and dignities of affected people, and increasing visibility and acceptability of optimal practices. Finally, in such contexts, they play a critical role in outreach to communities in need by organizing volunteer networks, facilitating access to government services, and using places of worship as sites of emergency response in times of crisis (e.g., for storage and distribution of essential supplies, as medical camps).

Monitoring

To track implementation and outputs systematically and to measure the effectiveness of programmes or activities conducted, it is essential to engage in a robust monitoring of communication efforts. During a network or group's initial phase, quantitative monitoring (indicators such as how many meetings, how many people participated, etc.) can be monitored, with qualitative monitoring indicators being included once the network reaches maturity and is able to sustain itself. Over time, it is important to develop a comprehensive monitoring framework to assess impact and reach; and to invest in research in order to understand how effective FL interventions have been in changing the attitudes and practices of their congregants and peers.

A detailed monitoring matrix can be found in the longer version of this guidance note.

Challenges with FL/FBO Engagements

The human rights-based approach, which is core to UNICEF's policy and programmatic work, emphasizes the tenets of equality, non-discrimination, participation and accountability. Engaging with faith actors who contribute to the violation of these principles can be damaging to the reputation and integrity of UNICEF. It is, therefore, critical to recognize and prevent the common challenges and risks involved in FL/FBO engagement that may work against the social and development goals of such a partnership. These include, but are not limited to, the following:



Lack of transparency and accountability are a risk when partnering with any CSO that has a closed organizational and governance structure.



Adoption of inappropriate behaviours such as exclusion (discriminating against members outside of their faith), proselytizing, stigmatizing or other actions that could be contrary to UNICEF's objectives have been known to take place.



Inability to work on sensitive issues (e.g., sexual and reproductive health, HIV, LGBTQI+ rights, sexual and gender-based violence, etc.) may be a concern for some religious leaders.



Promotion of negative and harmful gender stereotypes or speaking dismissively about gender equality and women's empowerment can occur.



Association or alignment with violent extremist or radical groups, including directly contributing to upholding oppressive regimes and living conditions that are inconsistent with UNICEF's values and goals, can be a major challenge.



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