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

# KEY MESSAGES

* UNICEF South Sudan C4D is focused on sustaining community engagement during an L2 emergency with widespread food insecurity 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.
* 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 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 and insecurity, mass displacement, widespread 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.[[1]](#footnote-0)

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%).[[2]](#footnote-1) 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 guide their communities towards peaceful coexistence. In South Sudan, Religious persecution is not common, and the conflict is based along ethnic lines that cut across religions and denominations. Religion works as a bond among people in South Sudan and religious leaders, along with community leaders, can lead social change at the grassroots level.

In some cases, religious links can also be associated with ethnic affiliations, meaning 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 the series of peace negotiation initiatives and charting the future for the country. Religious leaders and their associated networks and organizations are fairly united at this national level and are well connected with regional actors such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, who 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. There are a national radio and television service (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.[[3]](#footnote-2)

Sudan is among the bottom 10 countries in Reporters Without Borders annual press freedom index.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 faith -based radio stations is supported by Catholic church to reach communities with reconciliation and peace building messages through nine radio stations.

## 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, significantly limit their access to information. This information includes information regarding their rights, or helpful information such as maternal and child health, disease prevention, hygiene promotion, protection or gender-based violence (GBV) awareness raising materials and access to services. Most children do not have access to essential health services in their early childhood, and a greater majority of school-age children are out of school. Additionally, 34% of girls marry at 18 years and under and 12% of girls younger than 15.[[4]](#footnote-3)

Religious leaders hold trusted positions in communities and have regular audiences with large groups of community members in churches, mosques, and in other community meetings and events. Have an established network of people, an organization and structure that reach from central to regional, district and village level, can sanction certain behaviours or actions and be allies both for social mobilization and policy advocacy. In South Sudan, religious leaders command high respect and trust from political leaders and the general public. UNICEF and faith-based organization can enter into a partnership based on shared values common to both organizations. 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. They can convince families to adopt healthy and safe practices.

# 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 shifting social norms to achieve these outcomes requires the involvement and buy-in of key decision makers, including traditional decision makers such as religious and community leaders, stakeholders and agents of change of both genders. Through a cross-sectoral approach and integrated programming involving Child Protection, Health, Nutrition, WASH and Education, C4D developed and implemented behaviour change communication strategies aimed at addressing issues related to maternal and child health, disease prevention, hygiene promotion, including Menstrual Hygiene Management and protection.

Overarching outcomes for child wellbeing include:

* All the children of South Sudan visit stationed and/or outreach sites five times by their first birthday. These sites ensure the children are fully immunized as required.
* All children under five receive polio vaccines during the campaigns and remain free from polio.
* Both boys and girls are enrolled in schools, and complete at least their primary education achieving the ability to read and write.
* Children under 18 are prevented from recruitment in conflicts as soldiers and are enrolled in school instead.
* New born children are registered through the birth notification system.

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

Family level:

* Parents take appropriate care of their children, including during pregnancy ensuring immunization and nutrition.
* Children get breast milk from their birth to 6 months of age.
* Both boys and girls are treated equally.
* Parents stop practicing girl child marriage and enroll girl child in school
* All children regardless of their gender regularly attend school.
* Members of each family are conversant on at least five key lifesaving messages and invariably apply them in their own lives.

Community level:

* Community members have a collective understanding on critical issues from their most trusted source.

Policy/ system level:

* Political leaders and state executives can take measures easily when they are supported by faith actors.

UNICEF South Sudan engage religious leaders as a crucial part of their Communications for Development work. C4D triggers behaviour change and faith-based organizations also work to change behaviour. 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 part and parcel of daily C4D activities***

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UNICEF C4D section currently covers 78 out of 80 counties of the country through the nine implementing partners. A 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 to a faith-based organization, religious leader, and/or community elder. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations are a crucial part of the mobilization network.

*“They [religious actors] are part and parcel of our community engagement strategy.” Gopinath Durairajan, UNICEF C4D South Sudan*

Vulnerable women and girls are a programmatic focus across South Sudan for UNICEF. Each volunteer surveys at least 250 households within their community, to identify 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 facilitate 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, decisions are in consultation with key community leaders, such as the religious leaders.

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 local of levels. 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.

A necessary part of the process at the community-level, faith engagement was a mapping exercise. 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, and has contributed to better planning and outreach to people through faith-based organizations and religious leaders. 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. UNICEF South Sudan partners through Memorandum of Understanding with WFP and the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) and South Sudan Islamic Council (SICC) formal basis to ensure links to religious actors. The councils provide platforms for engagement in peacebuilding activities. These structures have been used to roll-out UNICEF supported religious leader’s engagement peacebuilding initiatives, health programs such as routine immunization, and prevention of disease outbreaks such as polio, measles, and cholera.

How is this information used otherwise?

These 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 last 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 that it was appropriate. This is the same process for all new messaging that UNICEF South Sudan wishes to use. There were also efforts to link in with various officials as they attended Eid sermons and events and provide approved messages for them to use.

***Special Projects***

UNICEF has also joined with partners to undertake activities particularly directed at religious leaders and their affiliated structures. In partnership with Search for Common Ground, 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 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 cohesions and strengthen tolerance. This 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, Director of the Bureau of Religious Affairs in South Sudan represented the government. Following the training, the trained religious leaders took part in two follow-up meetings to strategize and plan for ongoing peacebuilding activities in their communities.

Their follow-up activities 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 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 organization 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.

*“They're a huge part in ensuring that negotiations happen: releasing the children from militias, and reintegrating them with the family, and then onward integration into the community. They play a huge role. They are our go to partners in terms of getting things done...” Gopinath Durairajan, UNICEF C4D South Sudan[[5]](#footnote-4)*

Also, UNICEF partnered earlier with Search for Common Ground and the Catholic Radio Network to conduct a baseline survey on knowledge attitudes and practices towards social cohesion and conflict 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. It used quantitative data through a household survey among 4,074 respondents with a further 107 qualitative interviews.

# Progress and Results

Communications with religious leaders are integrated into the standard operations of UNICEF South Sudan through its Communications 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 together 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 following an outbreak of measles.[[6]](#footnote-5) The deaths occurred after a vaccination campaign as there had been gaps showing some people had not been vaccinated. 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.

*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*

A period of reflection following the AEFI 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 and the humanitarian context and meant that the last few years had mainly seen shorter term, duplications, and equally gaps in engagement. The community volunteer network is part of the bridging of the humanitarian and development nexus and the consistent work to orient religious leaders on a regular basis helps to build knowledge in the communities so that the community volunteers and religious and community leaders become the experts in the community rather than relying on outside information from UNICEF and others.

*“If you do two trainings with them [religious leaders] in a year, that is not going to change anything. They should be the key technical expertise on the ground in ensuring quality services are delivered... key 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*

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.

## Challenges

Due to the vast diversity of religious leaders in towns and villages across the country, UNICEF South Sudan must be sensitive to highlighting any one group over another. The UNICEF strategy integrates faith actors thoroughly, but because of the instability in the country, lack of and 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 a 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 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 that 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, communications for development can achieve active engagement with religious leaders on issues connected to health and nutrition. However, other problems such as child marriage( FGM is not practiced in South Sudan) are not currently part of the discussion. These more sensitive topics are not yet part of the programming, because other basic universal needs remain a priority. Gender dynamics are identified as an issue within the country, and religious and traditional leaders perpetuate some of the social norms around the role of women. UNICEF South Sudan C4D already works on gender somewhat, 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.

While it is currently a humanitarian context, communications for development achieves robust engagement with religious leaders on issues related to health and nutrition interventions. Yet sensitive social norms such as child marriage are not part of the programming, due to other basic universal priorities. 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 continued 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, 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. UNICEF’s added value in this setting is the institutional capacity to create such a widespread community mobilization structure and include religious leaders and faith-based organizations within that structure.
* UNICEF has created its own community mobilization structure, 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. UNICEF’s added value in this setting 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 will help with the prioritization of where and who to support with capacity strengthening.
* Future activities to increase sustainability in this model include help with developing and supporting efforts to strengthen platforms for intra- and inter-faith collaboration, growing partnerships with faith-based organizations, and increasing the representation of faith-based organizations in key 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, 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. Aligned with scriptural and heart dialogue, UNICEF should investigate ways that key messages on child wellbeing can be incorporated into existing religious structures and practices, 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.

Lessons learned:

* Faith actor mapping helps UNICEF COs understand who and where potential partners and community leaders operate
* 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
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