## One step at a time: Finding common ground with religious and cultural institutions to deliver an integrated rights package

# Uganda's Situation

## 98%

of Uganda's population report to a religious affiliation

✝ **84 %**
are Christians

☪ **14 %**
Muslims

With support from UNFPA,

## 10M

people are reached nationally with SRH and HIV information through mass media channels owned by the religious institutions

With support from UNFPA, cultural institutions and leaders reach over

## 2.5M

people annually with social norms interventions to prevent gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS, and to promote SRHR



### Introduction

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action acknowledges cultural and religious beliefs as a human right. It underscores the strength of culture and religion in influencing the day–to-day lives of a population for sustainable development.

Uganda is a predominantly religious country with diverse cultures encompassing beliefs, customs, norms, and values of the population. UNFPA programming in Uganda recognizes that both culture and religion affect human experiences and lives, and can support communities to bring about positive change from within. Thus, religious and cultural institutions have become key partners in advancing sexual and reproductive health (SRH), moving the issues from the private space to the public space where they must be discussed and addressed. Issues considered taboo by these institutions before ICPD, such as family size, early marriage, violence against women, wife inheritance, female genital mutilation reproductive rights and reproductive health services are now being discussed publicly, from the pulpits of a village church, mosque or temple. Moreover, religious and faith-based organizations have solid countrywide infrastructure, including churches, mosques, schools, health centers income generating projects and youth organizations. Partnerships with these institutions has enabled UNFPA-supported programmes to reach the most vulnerable and marginalized communities, ensuring to leave no one behind.

### Working from within: Engaging cultural and religious leaders for social change

Social and cultural realities present challenges, and also opportunities, for advancing sustainable development. This is particularly true when dealing with sexual reproductive health and rights issues including family planning, maternal health, HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, as well as harmful cultural and social practices. It is a process that requires patience, a willingness to listen carefully and respect for cultural diversity. It requires building of trust, mapping out champions, using evidence to influence a paradigm shift, and aligning interests to create an environment conducive to collaboration among the different stakeholders.

**Building trust -** UNFPA's mandate touches on some of the most sensitive and intimate spheres of human existence, as it seeks to ensure every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled. From the outset it requires the building of trust and creating an environment conducive for collaboration among the different stakeholders. Uganda, like other countries in East Africa, rate faith as "very important" to them: 98 percent of the population reports to a religious affiliation (84 percent Christians and 14 percent Muslims). To build trust and lay ground for a working relationship, UNFPA set up a series of mechanisms to ensure the systematic integration of cultural sensitivity into all human-rights based programming efforts, including:

- Cultivating an understanding of this social and cultural context in which programmes are being implemented.
- Creating a positive negotiating environment with partners and stakeholders.
- Acknowledging that patience and transparency are necessary when programming for behaviour change.
- Respecting people's culture and expressions.
- Honoring commitments and agreements.
- Promoting universally recognized human rights in ways and means that enable communities to own these rights.



**Mapping out opinion leaders/champions -** These are agents of change who have a deep understanding of the local communities as well as the legitimacy to advocate for human rights from within. Influencing deeply held social, cultural, and religious beliefs often begins with identifying the local actors who have the capacity and legitimacy to motivate and mobilize communities to become active partners in development. Partnering with local change actors has become an invaluable strategy in creating the conditions necessary for acceptance and ownership of programmes at local and national levels. Through diverse partnerships, UNFPA draws on the positive attributes to foster change. Elders, kings, bishops and imams (muslim clergy) are opinion leaders in Uganda's complex cultural environment. UNFPA has successfully reached out to partner with them in promoting healthier behaviours, as well as in the campaign to eliminate harmful traditional practices.

**Using evidence to influence a paradigm shift -** There are positive and challenging aspects in every culture. Besides, gaining the support of community champions, who are usually cultural or religious leaders is often necessary before engaging effectively with communities. One way to accomplish this is by presenting evidence-based data on issues of concern to the community, such as the health of mothers and children, the impact of violence against women,

and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, as an entry point for discussion. Providing accurate information and relevant data, prior to designing grass-roots advocacy work is important to dispel any fears or misconceptions and to get the full support of communities. Such information can help defuse potential tensions by focusing on the shared goal of people's well-being. Once stakeholders understand the potential value of proposed programmes, discussions can be expanded to more sensitive issues.

**Aligning interests -** Culture is created by people, and people can change culture. Communities look at their cultural values and practices and determine whether and how they impede or promote human rights. Through the "Culture Lens" tool, UNFPA and partners ensure to understand the cultural dynamics in each society where we work. This means assessing the positive, as well as challenging cultural values, assets, expressions and power structures. Systematic outreaches to communities; engaging in dialogue, listening, sharing knowledge and insights, and jointly planning the ways forward, are critical aspects of the process to build a mutual understanding of culturally sensitive approaches. Promoting culturally sensitive approaches includes:

- Creating a positive negotiating environment with partners and stakeholders
- Being patient
- Respecting the cultures of others
- Honouring commitments
- Promoting universally recognized human rights in ways that enable communities to own these rights.



## Aligning with cultural and religious institutions to influence social change

UNFPA set up a series of mechanisms to ensure the systematic integration of cultural sensitivity into all human-rights based programming efforts. For example, the "Culture Lens" is an analytical and programming tool developed to help policy makers and development practitioners use positive cultural values, assets and structures to reduce resistance to the ICPD Programme of Action. Through these partnerships UNFPA's work with cultural and religious institutions in Uganda has been ground-breaking as illustrated below:

| CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS | RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS |
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| In collaboration with the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MoGLSD), UNFPA set a precedent in establishing granting arrangements with nine cultural institutions of Acholi, Buganda, Busoga, Bunyoro, Karamoja Elders Association, Lango, Obusinga Bwa Rwenzururu, Teso and Tooro to develop and implement integrated SRH, HIV, and GBV prevention programmes. Other supported institutions include Lugbara, Alur, Tieng Adhola, and Bamasaba. | UNFPA has since 2010 collaborated with all major faith denominations including: the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church of Uganda, the Muslim Supreme Council, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Born Again Federation, the Orthodox Church, and the Baptist Union of Uganda, all congregating under the Interreligious Council of Uganda (IRCU) for expanded SRHR programming. UNFPA compliments institutional resources and provides technical support to a range of interventions primarily targeting systems strengthening for sustained faith leadership-led actions. |

## Strengthening advocacy

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| The Forum of Kings and Cultural Leaders of Uganda has provided a platform for knowledge sharing, consensus building and advocacy around SRH, HIV and GBV issues. It converges all the fifteen-government endorsed cultural institutions at national level. In 2010, the Forum endorsed a declaration of commitment to advance maternal health, family planning, HIV/AIDS, and GBV prevention programmes as a fundamental contribution to national development. | Inter-denominational consultations and consensus building through the IRCU resulted in resolutions, joint declarations and policy guidance in form of position papers, leadership manuals, and pastoral letters to guide institutionalized actions on SRH, HIV, and GBV. These align to national policies while protecting the sanctity of religious doctrines of the denominations. They guide messaging on SRHR during routine institutional community outreaches. |

## Building capacity

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| Over 4,500 cultural leaders at policy and community levels have been oriented on SRH, HIV, GBV issues and about 1,500 were trained in community dialogue skills to champion community actions. This has enabled them to acquire the skills and tools to enhance development decision-making, participation and accountability within their own communities, as well as at the national, regional, and international levels. | Over 10,000 religious leaders at national, sub-national, and community levels from over 50 districts have been oriented on SRH, HIV and GBV, guided by commonly agreed positions at IRCU and denominational levels. This has enhanced capacity of religious leaders to champion socio-norm change and community empowerment. |

## Community mobilization

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| Cultural institutions and leaders reach over 2.5 million people annually with social norm change interventions, utilizing various channels including public rallies, community dialogues, cultural events, organized marathons to end FGM, among other events. | The various denominations reach up to 4.5 million people annually with social change messages using congregational, lay leadership, education, health, social welfare platforms of religious institutions to mobilize, educate and empower communities to eliminate harmful practices and promote positive values and practices. Up to 10 million people are reached nationally through mass media channels (television, radio, and magazines) owned by the religious institutions. |

## Consensus building

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| Following community dialogues conducted by cultural leaders, nine cultural institutions compiled reports on cultural norms and practices that informed action planning for community-led cultural transformational initiatives. The reports document evidence on the socio-cultural norms, values, attitudes, beliefs, practices that impact on the advancement of SRH, as well as HIV/AIDS and GBV prevention. | Joint cultural and religious leaders' dialogues have facilitated consensus building on controversial socio-cultural norms and practices. The Council of Presidents of IRCU comprising of the topmost denominational leadership endorsed joint policy guidance in form of pastoral letters in the areas of HIV prevention, prevention of teenage pregnancy, prevention of female genital mutilation, responsible procreation, prevention of GBV, and support for maternal health. These have been adopted at denominational level and messages on SRH, HIV/AIDS, and GBV prevention have been integrated into routine institutional work during community outreaches. |
| Ten cultural institutions developed Issue Briefs on harmful norms, beliefs and practices. The Issue Briefs make deeper analysis of specific cultural rites and their implications on the advancement of SRH, HIV/AIDS and GBV prevention. They have become tools that guide advocacy, community mobilization and resource mobilization for expanded action. | Religious leaders at denominational level have agreed to focus on thematic issues. For example, the House of Bishops of the Church of Uganda endorsed a resolution to utilize their structures to implement activities for the advancement of SRH, HIV/AIDS, and GBV prevention. |

# Learning from UNFPA's engagement of Cultural and Religious Institutions

- Effective partnerships with cultural and religious leaders and institutions are only nurtured by strong adherence to principles of mutual respect, evidence-based independent thought, and promotion of locally owned approaches. This helped to establish ground for trust and to create synergies for systematic focus on the long-term socio-norm change goals.

- Generation of evidence on the importance of cultural and religious social teaching is a key to responsive interventions but more important is the engagement of the respective communities and leadership in generating the evidence and supporting them to implement informed owned social transformation processes.

- Some sexual and reproductive health issues are culturally and socially sensitive or even taboo to discuss openly. Empowering religious and cultural leaders to explore the links between social teachings, cultural beliefs and practices on one hand and the impact of sexual and reproductive ill-health, HIV and GBV on the wellbeing of their subjects or congregants on the other hand, transforms them into committed champions for positive reforms.

- Top-level leadership commitment and collaboration is critical in effective programme implementation at the national, community and household levels. It is however more critical to work with the leaders to reach the lower level structures and communities, complementing their resource base for expanded and consistent coverage.

- Gender equality is critical to reducing women's vulnerability to sexual and reproductive ill health and HIV infection. Male dominated religious and cultural leadership has acknowledged and are innovating around engaging males to break social cultural barriers and create equitable environments that allow girls and women to participate in national development as equal partners.

- Minimal investment into cultural and religious institutions to build leadership and systems capacity for people-centered SRHR programming yield bigger results as evidenced from the expanded resource mobilization from institutional and external sources to expand programming by cultural and religious institutions at various levels. However, this needs to be sustained over a long period of time to allow the partnership to mature and trust to fully develop, multiplying the chances for positive results for suitable development.