



# Policy Brief Faith Actors in the COVID-19 Response

August 2020

With now millions of confirmed cases and well over half a million confirmed deaths, the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the immediate and long-term well-being of children, families and communities around the world in fragile and stable, urban and rural contexts alike. Well-intentioned government stay at home orders, school closures, movement restrictions and bans on social gatherings, while critical for containing the virus, have had a significant impact on all aspects of life, including religious life and on communities of faith. Without engagement and concerted support efforts at all levels, COVID-19 and certain aspects of response measures have the potential to lead to catastrophic results for the most vulnerable children, families and communities.

COVID-19 is stretching formal and informal aspects of community life. The pandemic is overwhelming health systems. Country economies are reaching a breaking point, with particularly significant impact for the livelihoods of vulnerable families and those dependent on daily wages. COVID-19 is also affecting community relationships and trust. Lack of trust in government leaders or health officials can lead citizens to be unwilling to accept essential

health messages and take the necessary steps to combat the spread of the disease. The stress, fear and emotional vulnerabilities of children and their caregivers can be particularly acute, especially in light of prolonged school closures<sup>1</sup> and the uncertainty about their health system's capacity to withstand the pandemic or how long community and household quarantines will last.

This social isolation contributes to the likelihood that children will experience violence, neglect or abuse. World Vision estimates that up to 85 million children could have experienced physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse as a result of the quarantines in just May-July alone.<sup>2</sup> The potential for further conflict and cycles of displacement also increases as the pandemic evolves, as communities take measures to avoid infection and mitigate the pandemic's indirect impacts. Further social breakdown through stigmatisation could drive additional displacement, with particularly significant impact on children. A recent World Vision survey of the situation for migrant and refugee children affected by the Venezuela crisis and living in the region found that many families have lost livelihoods and income to cover basic needs as a result of the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

This has led to evictions, family separations, increased incidents of discrimination (over 90% of respondents in Peru believed this was due to COVID-19) and, ultimately, the difficult choice to return to Venezuela—often irregularly—due to these hardships.<sup>4</sup> These hardships and the choice to migrate back to Venezuela increase the protection risks these children and families face, as well as their exposure to the virus.

Faith plays a role in the lives and behaviours of 84% of the world's population<sup>5</sup> and faith leaders in particular can exercise considerable influence in many communities during the current crisis. Faith leaders can be a positive influence, sharing accurate information, modelling healthy behaviours and responding to the most vulnerable. However, without support and engagement, they can also support the spread of misinformation and myths about COVID-19.

Faith leaders are trusted community leaders with vital social, access and spiritual capital.<sup>6</sup> As learned during the Ebola crisis, they can play an essential role in sharing accurate fact-based messages, combatting myths, and engaging within their communities to address harmful or unhealthy practices.<sup>7</sup> They can also influence and engage with families, offering vital insight into identifying the most vulnerable children, supporting referral mechanisms, and challenging underlying beliefs to address and end violence.

Faith leaders can play a vital role in combatting fear, reducing stigma and encouraging social cohesion. Furthermore, faith communities provide spiritual support for children and caregivers that serves as an essential resource for healing and resilience.<sup>8</sup> Faith leaders are already engaging in prevention and response work but often need support, resources and capacity building to do so more effectively.

Humanitarian and development actors have often failed to consider faith leaders and faith communities as essential partners in understanding local contexts, addressing root causes of issues and in designing solutions. Even when recognising the important role of faith leaders, governments, multilateral organisations and NGOs have often approached faith leaders as a tool/instrument to further specific agendas, failing to take into account the importance of building relationships or understanding the diversity and nuance of faith perspectives even in the same context. World Vision recognises and understands that spiritual well-being is often as important to people as material well-being, and faith actors have access to spaces and can mobilise networks closed to secular actors. Given the unique access and sustained presence of faith actors in many COVID-19 affected contexts, meaningful partnerships between faith and humanitarian actors can ensure children and communities in the most hard-to-reach areas are served in the immediate and longer term.<sup>9</sup>

## World Vision's Response

**World Vision's Christian identity and humanitarian principles underpin and drive all of World Vision's work. The Christian theological framework for responding to emergencies is four-fold:**

- All of humanity is created in the image of God, and as such, has inherent value and dignity;
- Our ultimate motivation is derived from what we have experienced in Jesus Christ;
- Selfless love is the ultimate criterion for our humanitarian action; and
- Our work and efforts are witness to our experience of a loving and caring God.<sup>10</sup>

World Vision's strong relationships with local faith communities have proven critical for the successful delivery of health and child protection interventions, provision of psychosocial support and advocacy. World Vision's unique Channels of Hope methodology has supported more than 450,000 leaders from all faiths in more than 50 countries to ensure essential prevention, care messages and action for child well-being during past Zika and Ebola outbreaks. World Vision has made faith resources for COVID-19<sup>11</sup> available across the full network of its faith partners, providing faith leaders with the tools they need to support their communities' in prevention, care and response efforts.

Through established partnerships with faith communities, World Vision has helped more than 20,000 families in more than 60 countries by using both virtual and socially distanced support to increase caregivers' capacity to provide spiritual nurture and positive parenting for their children,<sup>12</sup> contributing to enhancing their resilience and combatting violence. Faith leaders already provide counselling and emotional care, and World Vision works to ensure they have the skills and capacity to provide psychological first aid effectively.

For example, in Kenya, World Vision has trained 710 faith leaders in psychological first aid. These leaders have served their communities' children and families with vital resources, basic counselling and referrals for health services. World Vision is also partnering with diverse interreligious faith networks to ensure meaningful community relationships that promote social cohesion and peace through a range of methods including Do No Harm for Faith Groups.<sup>13</sup> In Indonesia, World Vision worked with the Communication Forum of Interfaith Community in Papua to produce anti-stigma resources and training.

In crisis-affected Venezuela, World Vision is working with the Hope Network, a church network which ensures safe and consistent access to deliver food aid and psychological first aid to the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach children and families. In South Sudan, World Vision reached over 1.4 million people with a COVID-19 awareness campaign, working in collaboration with various partners, including 420 faith leaders. In Afghanistan, World Vision partnered with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Ministry of Haji and Religious Affairs to train 60 faith leaders who passed on prevention messaging to 1,300 people. Globally, World Vision has equipped more than 88,000 faith leaders to share accurate information about preventing COVID-19 with their communities.

These relationships and networks provide the platform to ensure the COVID-19 pandemic's indirect impacts in each context can be identified and addressed comprehensively and meaningfully through programmatic engagement and advocacy.

## World Vision's Recommendations

**The COVID-19 pandemic is dramatically affecting the lives of millions of children, jeopardising their immediate and long-term health and well-being. Local faith leaders and communities bring unique and essential contributions to the global COVID-19 response. This includes promoting prevention of the disease, supporting children and families, and advocating for effective solutions. Based on decades of experience working with faith communities to promote the well-being of children and families in crises, World Vision recommends the following:**

### **Governments should:**

- Prioritise faith leaders/faith partners as essential stakeholders to help prepare and protect individuals, families, and the public's health during early response, in line with the WHO's COVID-19 Preparedness and Response guidance.<sup>14</sup>
- Collaborate with local faith-based organisations (FBOs), faith leaders and communities to develop messages, promote healthy behaviours and practices, and encourage adaptation of religious rituals and rites, such as religious services, baptisms, ablutions and burial practices, in order to protect communities from COVID-19.
- Make child protection and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) core components of the COVID-19 response, implementing a faith-sensitive MHPSS strategy for reaching those directly and indirectly impacted, especially those most vulnerable. This support should include partnering with faith communities to address fear, stigma, negative coping strategies and other needs identified through assessments, and should build towards communities' ability to have safe spaces to practice their faith.



## Humanitarian actors, including UN agencies, international and local NGOs, and FBOs should:

- Collaborate with local faith leaders and communities to develop messages, promote healthy behaviours and practices, and encourage adaptation of religious rituals and rites, such as religious services, baptisms, ablutions and burial practices, in order to protect communities from COVID-19.
- Collaborate with and support local faith communities to increase their knowledge about prevention and response to COVID-19 and to develop faith-sensitive MHPSS skills such as psychological first aid, in line with global humanitarian protection standards, alongside religious and spiritual support that contributes towards resilience. This should include training faith leaders in the most appropriate ways to refer individuals who may need more specialised support.
- Assess the underlying spiritual beliefs alongside general levels of understanding related to COVID-19 in the communities where they work, partnering with faith actors and supporting the government with development of risk communication and community engagement plans based on these assessments, sensitisation of community leaders, and amplification of agreed risk communication and messaging. FBOs and faith actors can play an important role in challenging and addressing beliefs and attitudes that may cause harm or limit an effective response, as well as in promoting cultural or religious values that enhance the response.

## Faith leaders should:

- Ensure they share and promote accurate, science-based information about COVID-19.
- Follow local and national guidelines on gatherings, ensuring all meetings and rituals are conducted safely and taking all preventative measures to stop the spread of COVID-19.
- Provide appropriate spiritual and psychosocial first aid to contribute to healing and resilience for children and their parents/caregivers.
- Contribute to child protection referral mechanisms, recognising their unique access and opportunity to identify and support vulnerable children facing violence.
- Support parents' home-based education efforts and promote continued education.
- Promote interfaith and intrafaith collaboration, peace and social cohesion between communities.
- Address fear, stigma and false information, and combat xenophobia in the midst of the pandemic.
- Advocate for a comprehensive response to the direct and indirect child protection, livelihoods and health impacts of the pandemic on the most vulnerable children and families.

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, "COVID-19 Impact on Education," 25 May 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse> Since the onset of the pandemic, 194 governments around the world have mandated country-wide school and university closures in an effort to contain the virus, disrupting the education of nearly 1.6 billion learners (including children, youth and adults). While some schools have re-opened, as of late July, 106 countries maintain these closures, affecting nearly 1.06B learners or 60.5% of the world's student population.

<sup>2</sup> World Vision, "Aftershocks: A Perfect Storm," May 2020, p4. <https://www.wvi.org/publications/report/coronavirus-health-crisis/covid-19-aftershocks-perfect-storm>

<sup>3</sup> World Vision, "Venezuelan Children: Between a Rock and a Hard Place," June 2020, p15. [https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Ni%20C3%B1ez%20venezolana%20Covid19%20Ing%20C3%A9s%20Web\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Ni%20C3%B1ez%20venezolana%20Covid19%20Ing%20C3%A9s%20Web_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Trust, "The Global Religious Landscape," December 2012. <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>

<sup>6</sup> Joint Learning Initiative, "A Mixed Blessing: Roles of Faith Communities in Ending Violence Against Children," September 2019. <https://evac.jliflc.com/resources/a-mixed-blessing-roles-of-faith-communities-in-ending-violence-against-children/>

<sup>7</sup> Smith, Sally, et al., "Religion and Ebola—Learning from Experience." The Lancet, 6 July 2015, pE24. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)61082-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)61082-0)

<sup>8</sup> Joint Learning Initiative, "Faith Action for Children on the Move Learning Brief: Spiritual Support," p1. <https://jliflc.com/resources/learning-brief-spiritual-support/>

<sup>9</sup> World Vision, "Humanitarian Policy Positions: Faith and Humanitarian Action," April 2019, p3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p1.

<sup>11</sup> World Vision, "COVID-19: Guidance for Faith Communities & Places of Worship" <https://www.wvi.org/publications/faithresponssetocovid19>

<sup>12</sup> World Vision, "Through Celebrating Families Project Model" <https://www.wvi.org/faith-and-development/celebrating-families>

<sup>13</sup> World Vision, "Do No Harm for Faith Groups—Christian – Muslim Edition," 2 May 2017. <https://www.wvi.org/peacebuilding-and-conflict-sensitivity/publication/do-no-harm-faith-groups-christian-muslim-edition>

<sup>14</sup> WHO, "RCCE Action Plan Guidance: COVID-19 Preparedness and Response," March 2020. [https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/risk-communication-and-community-engagement-\(rcce\)-action-plan-guidance](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/risk-communication-and-community-engagement-(rcce)-action-plan-guidance)



Pastor Yohane Nyongani, the District Superintendent of the Malawi United Methodist Church, making a home visit to offer support to a family with a child who was recently rescued from early marriage. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, much of Pastor Nyongani's work has shifted to focusing on sensitising local communities and churches on preventative practices. He also partners with World Vision to identify and help community members in need, with special attention on child protection and preventing child marriages.

World Vision is undertaking the largest humanitarian response in its 70-year history to limit the spread of COVID-19 and reduce its impact on vulnerable children and their families, aiming to reach 72 million people, half of them children, over the next 18 months and raising US \$350 million to do so. Response efforts will cover 70 countries where World Vision has a field presence, prioritising scale up of preventative measures to limit the spread of the disease; strengthening health systems and workers; supporting children impacted by COVID-19 through education, child protection, food security, and livelihoods; and advocating to ensure vulnerable children are protected. For more information, read World Vision's [COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan](#).



[www.wvi.org](http://www.wvi.org)

World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities to reach their full potential by tackling the root causes of poverty and injustice. World Vision serves all people, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or gender.

For further information please contact:

Andrea Kaufmann  
Senior Advisor, Faith and External Engagement  
[andrea\\_kaufmann@wvi.org](mailto:andrea_kaufmann@wvi.org)

Ashleigh C. Lovett  
Senior Policy Advisor, Fragile & Conflict-Affected Contexts  
[ashleigh\\_lovett@wvi.org](mailto:ashleigh_lovett@wvi.org)