

Engaging Faith Leaders in Senegal to Promote Women's and Family Health

A World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) Project Supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

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FAMILY HEALTH AND FAMILY PLANNING are national priorities for Senegal. The 18-month project (January 2014–July 2015) aims to engage Senegalese religious leaders in dialogue and action in support of the program on family planning led by the Ministry of Health and Social Action. It marks a first effort to engage the Sufi orders and their leadership, as well as Christian leaders, in a systematic way on health issues. The program is also set within the context of the Ouagadougou partnership, a nine-country, multi-partner effort to advance family welfare and family planning across the region. Within this framework, the aim is to advance partnerships among government, religious, and civil society actors to speed progress and achieve sustainable results on various aspects of family health, including family planning.

Framing the issue: Reproductive health in Senegal

Senegal has made rapid strides in developing reproductive health services in recent years, but a notable shortfall in product and service uptake has prompted a fresh look at programs and options for new approaches. While government, NGOs, and other groups, including religious actors, have all contributed to improving the availability and quality of family planning products and services, especially supply and access, demand and utilization lag. The Senegal 2014 Demographic and Health Survey reported a contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) for modern methods of 20.3 percent nationwide. There is still a stark rural-urban divide; in 2014, 28.8 percent of married women in urban areas used a modern contraceptive method, as compared to only 13 percent in rural areas.

Senegal's population is projected to reach 18.6 million people in 2025, and population dynamics are a central



A health worker at a clinic near Thiès, Senegal shows off CycleBeads, one of many family planning methods (both natural and modern) offered.

development issue. With 43.6 percent of Senegalese under the age of 15 and an additional 20.5 percent between the ages of 15 and 24 (2010), more than half of the population will soon enter childbearing years.¹ Average family size is large at five children per woman, and this is often linked to negative health outcomes. Helping families to ensure healthy timing and spacing of births (HTSB) offers great promise to improve health and welfare. However, nearly one in three married women would like to space or limit births but is not using contraception.

The Ministry of Health and Social Action is committed to the goal of increased family planning uptake given the crucial importance of sexual and reproductive health for the well-being of Senegal's women, children, and families. This commitment is bolstered by the Ouagadougou Partnership, involving the governments of nine West African nations, along with partners such as USAID, the French development

1 POPIN data (UN) http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/unpp/panel_indicators.htm



agency (ADF), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

In the National Family Planning Action Plan 2012–2015, the Ministry affirms that faith leaders should be engaged at the national level as they can play crucial roles in advocating for family planning.

Faith context and engagement

In Senegal, linkages of religion with social and cultural structures and practices are tightly woven. Islam is the majority religion at 94 percent of the population, within which 90 percent belong to a Sufi order (*confrérie*). The two largest orders, the Muridiyya and the Tijaniyya, make up an estimated 80 percent of the Muslim population. There is also an active and dynamic Christian minority. Any public health effort seeking to achieve large-scale change in cultural attitudes and behaviors can benefit from mobilizing the largest orders, in particular. Senegalese culture is strongly pro-natalist, and having large families with multiple wives is a widely accepted ideal. The concept of healthy timing and spacing of births is extensively discussed and generally accepted. There is, however, a significant gap between national goals for healthy families with properly spaced births and the social adoption of knowledge and behaviors needed to achieve those goals.

Many religious leaders in Senegal do not believe that family planning contradicts their religious tenets. Muslim leaders generally share a view widely held internationally that the Islamic faith supports family planning. However, support to date has been more tacit than explicit. Further, there are some Muslim leaders who express strong opposition to family planning, portraying it as a Western plot or neo-colonial approach. Within this dynamic context, thoughtful observers argue that the government and its partners should engage religious leaders on the topic. Religious leaders who have received information and training on Senegal's family planning issues in relation to development tend to be supportive, underscoring the importance of dialogue and exchange. Some religious leaders, however, do not feel they have been adequately empowered to deliver key messages.

There are quite strong networks of faith actors (for example *Réseau Islam et Population*) that can potentially engage in issues relating to family planning in Senegal, and several collaborate with international NGOs and multi-lateral organizations like Tostan and UNFPA. These and other programs and networks highlight the potential for behavior change promulgated through faith leaders at the grassroots, community level. Such approaches are affirmed by the National Family Planning Action Plan 2012–2015, which envisions employing individuals (*personnes en charge d'approcher les champions religieux*) to advocate for

family planning and to recruit faith leaders who can be “champions” of family planning in communities throughout Senegal.

Prior experience with religious actors at the community level, as well as international experience, suggest that engaging the hierarchies of religious leadership, notably of Senegal's distinctive Sufi orders, offers new and powerful opportunities on health issues. Work with religious leaders at the community level is important but has not been sufficiently sustained or systematic to ensure broad or long-lasting mobilization of religious leaders or society. Working with senior religious leaders within the context of a broader understanding of religious engagement on development issues for Senegal, taking into account the institutional framework, has the potential to encourage significant shifts in social attitudes and behaviors. To understand better what are often sensitive issues and potential differences in approaches among leaders and institutions, WFDD has worked to gather information and engage in dialogue with key government, civil society, and faith community actors.

Research

The initial project phases involved research and dialogue. WFDD met with various partners of the government, visited religious organizations, and met with key faith leaders. The research involved an analysis of current resources and messaging on family planning, including background on religious media, a study of the intellectual work of Senegalese scholars regarding family welfare, and identification of informal women's networks in religious circles. The team also reviewed Islamic teachings about family planning and the roles that religious actors played in family planning programs in several Muslim-majority countries (Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Iran, and Morocco). Reports on each of these topics are being finalized. Researchers also explored the roles religious institutions play in health care provision and decision-making by meeting with health workers in Touba, seat of the Mouride order.

Formation of a working group

During 2014 a working group was formed, with a senior and experienced Senegalese religious leader (Sheikh Saliou Mbacké) as Secretary General. It first met in July and agreed to launch a continuing effort. The group is composed of senior religious leaders from each of the Sufi orders in Senegal, representatives from Christian denominations, and a Ministry of Health and Social Action official. The group's first meeting included presentation and discussion of background materials on family health and welfare. They also discussed issues such as youth approaches and various “population” arguments, including



Senegalese religious leaders participate in a March 2015 conference in Dakar that brought together representatives from religious communities, the Ministry of Health and Social Action, and development organizations to discuss religion and family planning.

the dangers of rapid population growth and benefits of a demographic dividend.

Subsequently, members of the working group visited religious leaders from each of the religious traditions across Senegal in what are called *visites de courtoisie*. This is a traditional approach, showing respect towards the leaders and hearing different views on the permissibility of family planning according to each religious interpretation. This approach also helps to build relationships and trust for future engagement and activities with religious leaders.

By September 2014, the group formally agreed to work together. WFDD coordinated a visit for the working group to Morocco in November in order to learn about from Morocco's experience with engaging religious leaders in family planning.² The working group met in Morocco with local religious leaders, NGOs working on family planning, UNFPA, and the Moroccan Ministry of Health. The exchange visit improved the working group's understanding of the need for family planning and its benefits for both the family and society. It also strengthened relationships among group members.

Constructing a statement from a religious perspective

In an effort to work from an agreed document (or "*argumentaire*") outlining religious arguments for and against family planning, local experts engaged by the working

group updated and broadened existing documents to serve as the foundation for a broader communication campaign. The resulting *argumentaire* is an indigenous document on family planning written by two Senegalese experts on family planning. Imam El Hadj Moustapha Gueye, current President of the Association of Imams and Ulemas of Senegal, is an intellectual respected for his knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence. He was a member and founder of the *Réseau Islam et Population* and its first president. The co-author is Imam Mouhammadou Kane, present Imam Ratib of the Mosque of Kaolack, also a recognized expert on family planning in Senegal. He has worked on, among other topics: Islam and violence-free education; the model of the Prophet; Islam and

reproductive health; 15 topics in the form of sermons on behalf of the NGO IntraHealth International; and preparing a document about Islam and abortion for the *Réseau Siggil Jigéen*. Among those cited in the *argumentaire* is Dr. Ibrahima Diop Mahmoud Barham, an internationally renowned intellectual who puts his knowledge and his life at the service of Islam and of man. He was the second president of the *Réseau Islam et Population*.

The *argumentaire* is written from the perspective of Islam and highlights the permissibility of family planning within the religion and its practice. It also addresses traditional methods of family planning in Senegal and addresses their permissibility within Islam. It presents religious interpretations, but also contrasts different debates on family planning in Senegal, highlighting the arguments of those who support it, those who are against it, and those that support the principle but oppose specific methods. Lastly, it lays out specific recommendations for promoting family planning in Senegal.

This document is distinctive in including statements made by *confrérie* leaders gathered during visits by the working group. These statements are especially noteworthy for demonstrating support for birth spacing in order to:

- Organize the family
- Protect the life and health of the mother and child
- Contribute to the physical and material well-being of the family

² See also: <http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/event-summary-visit-to-morocco-by-senegalese-religious-leaders-to-review-family-planning-activities>

Moving forward

The *visites de courtoisie* opened a dialogue with religious leaders and will continue as part of the project. Some leaders have yet to take an open or explicit position on family planning. This is the first time that the leaders of the Senegalese orders were systematically approached on the theme of family planning and opens a new discussion. The exercise requires patience and sensitivity, but the first steps represent an important opening of doors. Messages can be passed from person to person. Muslim leaders are not inclined to issue *fatwas* on the topic of family planning. Each leader need not give public instructions but can raise the subject with his close associates and followers until the message forms a broad echo among people.

A formal meeting with key stakeholders was held in March 2015. The Ministry of Health and Social Action, the working group, and WFDD met in order to review the work



In November 2014, working group members met with officials from Morocco's Ministry of Health during a visit to better understand the role that Moroccan religious leaders played in promoting family planning.

to date and discuss plans for the period ahead. Additional partner organizations and religious leaders outside the working group members were also invited to participate.

Who and what is the World Faiths Development Dialogue?

The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) works as an independent and unaffiliated actor to bridge the worlds of faith and secular development and thus enhance work to fight poverty and achieve social justice. Originally created within the World Bank, today it is based at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. Katherine Marshall is the Executive Director; Lord Carey of Clifton, former Archbishop of Canterbury, chairs the board of trustees. WFDD supports dialogue and consultations, fosters communities of practice, documents the work of faith-inspired organizations, and promotes understanding about why religious ideas and actors are fundamental for development. It also promotes partnerships among organizations, at national and international levels, where those promise to enhance quality development outcomes. WFDD works formally with the World Bank and Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Peace, Religion, and International Affairs and informally with many other faith, interfaith, and secular organizations.

WFDD has two basic objectives: to reinforce, underscore, and publicize the common purposes of religious and development institutions working actively to address poverty; and to explore issues where there is weak consensus and where common ground is unclear among different faith traditions, within faiths, and between faiths and development institutions. The aim is to address the bottlenecks that block action to fight poverty and to help improve understanding among communities. At the heart of WFDD's vision is an effort to bring voices and experience from poor communities more forcefully into development thinking at all levels, by facilitating more active participation by faith communities in the strategic reflection processes on which development programs are based. WFDD supports forward-thinking dialogue around action-oriented partnerships between faith-inspired and "secular" development institutions and the analytic work necessary to strengthen these partnerships.

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World Faiths Development Dialogue
3307 M Street, NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20007
T 202.687.6443 | E info@wfdd.us
berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/wfdd

www.wfdd.us