

Media Update

7 September 2017

UNESCO

Press Release

UNESCO signed an agreement with Italian Government to support girls' right to education and safeguarding of cultural heritage through education in Pakistan

Islamabad, Thursday, 7 September 2017: In the presence of the Minister for Federal Education and Professional Training, Mohammad Baligh-ur-Rehman, and Additional Secretary, Ministry of Information, Broadcasting and Natural Heritage, Syed Junaid Akhlaq, UNESCO and the Government of Italy signed an agreement of approximately USD 1.7 million to enable UNESCO to implement a two-year project titled "Support to girls' right to education and safeguarding cultural heritage through education in Pakistan". The agreement was signed by H.E Stefano Pontecorvo, the Italian ambassador to Pakistan, Ms. Santa Molè, Head of Italian Cooperation and Ms. Vibeke Jensen, UNESCO Representative.

The project has two components: the first one on Education which aims to support the efforts of Government of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in increasing access, retention and improving the quality of girls' education through capacity building and targeted interventions at both institutional and community levels. District Bahawalpur in the Punjab and District Swat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are focus districts. "The Italian funds allow us to expand our on-going girls' right to education interventions to more districts, and we are deeply grateful for that" said Vibeke Jensen, UNESCO representative. The second component is aimed at supporting the efforts of the Government of Pakistan in the protection of Cultural Heritage through enhancing the role of young people and communities in safeguarding cultural heritage through capacity building in protection. UNESCO will undertake awareness raising activities among the general public and specifically focus on school going



youth and teachers. All four provinces will benefit from the interventions of this component.

“SDG 4 on education points out the importance of teaching children respect for cultural diversity, respect for the environment and promote a culture of peace. “We are delighted to provide this assistance through UNESCO to the Government of Pakistan allowing future generations to fully appreciate the incredible rich and diverse culture that Pakistan possess” stressed Santa Molè, Head of AICS.

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UNICEF

Press Release

Launch of South Asia Religious Leaders’ Platform to Promote Children’s Rights

Religious leaders and representatives of faith-based organizations from across South Asia meet for the first time to discuss and advance children’s rights and wellbeing in the region.

KATHMANDU, 7 September 2017 – On September 5, UNICEF South Asia launched the first South Asia Religious Leaders’ Platform for Children in Kathmandu. The launch brought together more than 30 influential leaders and distinguished representatives from various religious communities across South Asia to underline the critical role they can play in promoting the fulfilment of child rights and also to harness regional solidarity towards a brighter future for all children in the region.

In South Asia – home to 1.7 billion people and 621 million children under 18 – despite economic growth and consequent improvements, massive disparities still exist preventing children from living in dignity, reaching their full potential and making choices about their futures. With religious



communities in South Asia having extensive networks and moral influence throughout the region, their potential to tackle some of these challenges and achieve real results for children is highly advantageous.

“Religious communities and UNICEF have a long history of shared values and goals of advancing children’s rights and enhancing their wellbeing. They continue to be our indispensable partner especially in our focus on reaching the poorest, most vulnerable and hardest to reach children and families. If we can fully tap the enormous potential of our partnerships by building on each other’s strengths, we can achieve tremendous results for children,” said Jean Gough, Regional Director of UNICEF South Asia, during her opening speech.

This regional meeting is a milestone in bringing together religious leaders and representatives of various faith-based organizations across South Asia. It was also a unique opportunity to encourage open dialogue, even about complex and sensitive issues like child marriage and open defecation. At present, there is no such space to place children at the core of the regional religious agenda. Therefore, UNICEF’s objective behind the launch of this platform is to create a vibrant space for religious communities to exchange knowledge and best practices; engage in dialogue and discussions; and, encourage joint harmony, commitment and concrete actions for children in the region. The two-day meeting ended with the religious leaders’ declaration of setting aside differences in backgrounds, culture and traditions and steadfastly carry forward their resolve to putting children’s rights and wellbeing at the centre of their religious agenda and actions.

“We are extremely pleased to see you all come together united in your efforts and commitment to use your influential voice and support for the development of children in our region. We, at UNICEF, will now proactively nurture and expand this network of religious communities. We will also ensure that the discussion carries beyond the meeting room and find ways to translate our commitment to child rights into results, for EVERY child in South Asia,” said Philippe Cori, Deputy Regional Director of UNICEF South Asia, as he closed the two-day meeting.

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Note for Editors:

Statements from religious leaders and representatives of faith-based organizations in eight countries in South Asia:



Afghanistan*: Preventing child marriage is an important area, which is under the focus of our religious scholars. With the government and other partners, we are currently working to increase the age of marriage for girls from 16 to 18 under the Family Law. Polio eradication is another area in which religious leaders are involved, as we help to mobilise society to ensure all children are vaccinated against this preventable disease. The religious scholars in Afghanistan are taking these actions according to the teachings, rules and values of Islam which protect children in all stages of their lives. Islam is friendly to children and pays great attention to their physical and psychological protection. – Professor Dr. Fazlul Hadi Wazeen, on behalf of the delegation of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan | *Afghanistan delegates were not able to attend the meeting but they shared this message with UNICEF.

Bangladesh: This ‘South Asia Religious Leaders’ Platform for Children’ is very important for sharing and learning from each other. Our religious leaders are more determined to continue working for socio-economic development and rights of children and women in the country. – Joint statement from the Islamic Foundation in Bangladesh

Bhutan: Children are everybody’s responsibility. While the ideas about all religious leaders in South Asia working for a common goal in realizing the rights of children will be an ideal desired goal, it would require taking a first realistic step. For Bhutan, this first step is building the capacity and sensitizing the religious leaders and faith-based organizations on issues impacting children and form an intra-religious group who can then become change agents to support realization of children’s rights. – Dasho Karma Tsering Namgyal, Secretary, Council for Religious Affairs in Bhutan.

India: It is good that faith leaders from South Asia countries have come together to work for children with UNICEF’s initiative. Child marriage and education have emerged as common themes across countries. Without education, people cannot be empowered. Education is our third eye. Education starts from our mother’s womb and continues till the grave. In fact, the first ayat in the Koran is on the significance of education. Koran preaches that we are all equal and everyone should get fair chances for education, health and other opportunities. – Md. Shafique Qasmi, President of Nakhoda Masjid, India

Today, approximately 83.6% of our world identifies as belonging to a faith. In many South Asian countries, the role of faith is far greater with almost 90-



99% subscribing to a faith. Thus, faith leaders have a huge role in solving the challenges that face our world. When interfaith alliances and dialogues occur, they must be to protect our most vulnerable communities, our women, children and indigenous and tribal populations. This is a great initiative by UNICEF to bring interfaith leaders together in Nepal for this two-day meeting to deliberate on and commit to working towards protecting and advocating for child rights. Let us now take this connection we have made to our congregations and bring about positive change for our children. – HH Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, India

Maldives: Islam ensures safeguarding of children's wellbeing as we consider it our duty to give our children, who is in the trust of our custody, access to health, education, immunisation, care, protection and ultimately, to lead a dignified and secure life. Thank you for this opportunity. I am sure all UNICEF countries will make a joint effort to protect the rights of all children. – Utz. Ibrahim Rasheed Moosa, Centre for Holy Quran, Maldives.

Nepal: We want to use this platform to express our commitment for the rights of children in Nepal especially education of children from poor family, promoting girls' rights, strengthening of family values, ending child marriage, etc. We believe that interfaith harmony, through its values and activities, can truly empower children. – Joint Statement from the National Inter Religious Network Nepal

Pakistan: The 'South Asia Religious Leaders' Platform for Children' has provided religious leaders with an excellent platform to develop interfaith harmony over child rights, understanding and protection. This remained a very result-oriented and effective gathering to convince religious leaders of South Asia to safeguard and protect child rights in their respective countries. Such events are very powerful and influential in communicating the agenda very loudly and such gatherings must be continued. – Dr. Hafiz Ghufan Ali, Director International Management Development Centre, Pakistan

Sri Lanka: Children are God's creation and everyone, including religious leaders, has a responsibility to take care of them, not just parents. We need to not only understand their rights but also protect these rights whether it is access to education, nutritious foods, or social protection. Sri Lanka has been through 30 years of conflict, which has exposed several generations to violence. We must work together to stop all forms of violence against children and instead build a happy, healthy and peaceful environment for children in the country. – Brahmachari Darshan Chaithanya, Sri Lanka.