

## **THE SOUTH ASIAN INTERFAITH PLEDGE ON CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND HIV/AIDS: PREVENTION, CARE AND COMPASSION**

*From the South Asia Interfaith Consultation on Children, Young People and HIV/AIDS, Kathmandu, Nepal, 4th-6th December 2003*

We, the representatives of religions and faith communities in South Asia – from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka - who met at the South Asia Inter-Faith Consultation on Children, Young People and HIV/AIDS, in Kathmandu, Nepal on 4-6 December 2003, together with partners from governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international agencies, as well as people living with HIV/AIDS, young people, activists, and opinion makers.

As trusted and respected members of our communities and societies, we acknowledge our important and unique role in shaping social values and public opinion, in speaking out against all forms of stigma and discrimination, and in ensuring care, compassion and support for all people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

We all agree that at the core of each of our religions is the recognition of the nobility of each individual, especially children and women, and the oneness of humanity. Our religions oblige us to affirm the responsibilities of human communities in all their diversity to children, and also ground our understanding of children as persons with inalienable rights and needs.

Each of our religions calls us to act in the name of “Consideration–Care–Compassion”, regarding the well-being of all children. Care calls us to act. Our deeply held and widely shared beliefs call on us to act together, to build a world that is fit for children.

Yet this world is being ravaged by the HIV/AIDS pandemic which knows no geographic or religious boundaries. In our region almost 5 million people are infected with HIV and tens of millions of families and children are directly affected.

Despite these staggering figures, we recognize that we still have an opportunity, at this time to prevent the epidemic from overwhelming the region, our countries and our communities.

We agree to use the challenge presented by the HIV/AIDS epidemic as an opportunity for spiritual growth, to care for one another, to support the living and the dying, and to appreciate the gift of life.

We acknowledge that the religious communities in South Asia must be at the frontline of a holistic and comprehensive response to reduce the spread of the virus and to ensure the care, protection and support of those infected and affected.

### **We also recall and reaffirm the following commitments on HIV/AIDS:**

- The UN Millennium Declaration of 8 September 2000, and the Millennium Development Goals;

- The Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS adopted at the 26<sup>th</sup> Special Session of the General Assembly in June 2001;
- The 11<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit Declaration, in January 2002;
- The World Fit For Children document adopted at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children in May 2002;
- The outcome of the South Asia Regional Forum for Young People on HIV/AIDS in Kathmandu, December 2002 and;
- The Kathmandu Call against HIV/AIDS in South Asia, from the High Level Conference on Accelerating the Momentum in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS in South Asia, in Kathmandu in February, 2003.

## **CALL TO ACTION**

Therefore, as representatives of religions and faith based organizations, being mindful of the principles of our teachings and sacred texts, and in the spirit of the Global Movement for Children, we reaffirm our commitment to care for and protect our children, young people and their families in the face of the enormous threat posed to our societies by the HIV epidemic.

We call on:

### **Governments, along with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to:**

1. Accelerate the level of engagement with religious leaders and faith-based organizations in order to strengthen mechanisms and initiatives to promote and coordinate HIV prevention and care actions that are child-centred, family and community-focussed, and human rights-based.
2. Pay particular attention within their regional, national and sub-national plans, to:
  - Supporting religious organizations to provide values-based HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention education;
  - Ensuring that all young people have access to information, life skills and services to reduce their vulnerability to HIV infection, including within school curricula;
  - Strengthening the protection and care of orphans and other vulnerable children within their extended families and communities;
  - Linking HIV/AIDS prevention activities, care and support for people living with HIV/AIDS and efforts to support orphans and other vulnerable children;
  - Harnessing the influence of the mass media to promote healthy lifestyles, values-based HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention education, and reduce stigma and discrimination;
  - Giving particular attention to the roles of boys and girls, men and women and addressing gender discrimination within their HIV/AIDS programmes;
3. Ensure, in the development and implementation of policies, plans and actions relating to HIV/AIDS, the full involvement of:
  - young people
  - people living with HIV/AIDS.

### **The United Nations system, in particular UNICEF, to:**

1. Mobilize a global alliance to address the impact of HIV/AIDS on children and young people, with particular attention to partnerships with governments, NGOs and faith based organizations;
2. Bring together, at regional and country levels, faith-based organizations, religious leaders, non-governmental organizations, civil society and government to forge a common and coherent response to the challenge of HIV/AIDS;
3. Support religious leaders and faith-based organizations, in all our countries, by providing regular and updated information, communication materials and training on HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support, in appropriate languages and forms;
4. Compile and share with us the positive experiences and practices in HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support, from among the world's religious communities, in particular examples from South Asia;
5. Promote action at all levels of society to eliminate discrimination faced by children and young people, in particular those affected by HIV/AIDS;
6. Support governments to include within their common response strategy, actions to reduce the vulnerability of children and young people to HIV infection and to protect and care for orphans and other vulnerable children within their families and communities.

**In addition, we pledge to work with young people to:**

1. Develop partnerships with religious leaders and faith based organizations in the spirit of mutual collaboration to increase understanding on HIV/AIDS and positively influence people of all faiths;
2. Discuss amongst their peers the roles and responsibilities of young people in HIV/AIDS prevention and care, including reducing stigma and discrimination, within the context of the spiritual and human values of their societies and communities;
3. Actively participate in dialogue, policy development and actions in areas that affect their own lives and that of their communities;
4. Cooperate and collaborate with parents, teachers, community leaders, elected representatives and religious leaders through formal and informal discussions, meetings and workshops to create an enabling and supportive environment for young people in HIV/AIDS prevention and care;
5. Reach out to those young people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, and/or at risk of HIV infection.
6. Promote awareness about living positively with HIV/AIDS;
7. Develop partnerships with youth organizations, especially those affiliated to faith communities;
8. Network at community, country and regional levels on HIV/AIDS prevention and care by sharing ideas and experiences among young people.
9. Support them to develop meaningful partnerships with the media, including faith based media, and to build the capacity of young journalists.

**And, in this spirit, we commit ourselves to:**

1. Revisit our traditions for teachings that affirm the intrinsic worth of all children and young people, and work to overcome past actions that might have fostered discrimination, particularly against girls;
2. Educate ourselves and the members of our communities, especially young people, about HIV/AIDS through training programmes and other means, to ensure that we all have the essential information and skills to reduce vulnerability

to HIV infection and to become informed and responsible members of our societies;

3. Work together to find common beliefs in our religious teachings that can help prevent HIV infection and alleviate the suffering of those affected by HIV/AIDS;
4. Encourage mutual respect, responsible and healthy relationships among all persons and provide the moral guidance essential to the healthy development of our children and young people;
5. Teach and speak in all fora, including places of worship, to reduce stigma and promote inclusion and compassion for people living with HIV/AIDS;
6. Provide guidance, counseling and support to enhance the capacity of families and communities to respond to the psychosocial needs of orphans, vulnerable children, and their caregivers;
7. Recognise the pressures that young people face and support them to gain the skills they need to make responsible choices. Acknowledge that they are a valuable resource to themselves, their peers and their communities;
8. Focus on the most vulnerable children and communities, and intensify our efforts to prevent children and young people from being infected by HIV and to provide care and support for those who are affected by the disease;
9. Develop partnerships at regional and national levels with governments, inter-governmental organizations, NGOs, community organizations, as well as the UN system, to address the situation of children and young people affected by HIV/AIDS and reduce their vulnerability;
10. Form an inter-religious council for South Asia to foster our collective response to the challenge of HIV/AIDS in this region, and similar mechanisms at national levels. We request UNICEF and the World Conference of Religions for Peace, along with other key partners to assist us in this effort.