

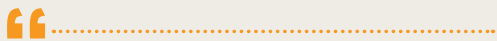
SWEDD SERIES: OPERATIONAL BRIEF

ENGAGEMENT OF RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS



The research informing this brief was led by Johns Hopkins University and is based on the SWEDD project. The information will guide the implementation of SWEDD+

This operational brief is one of a series that retrospectively documents the process of implementing the interventions of the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) project. It describes good practice, challenges and lessons learned in the process of engaging religious and traditional leaders. It summarizes the literature review and conversations with key respondents in Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Chad from February to March 2022. The implementation experiences described in this brief and the guide of the same name serve to inform engagement with leaders in SWEDD+, and in other projects in countries in the Global South, particularly in West and Central Africa.



Supported by certain customary, traditional and religious authorities (who claim to be the guarantors of tradition), these practices [initiation, excision, scarification, etc.] seem increasingly entrenched in the customs of certain populations (...). To combat them, these same authorities must be involved.

National authority, Chad



Phases of engagement with leaders

Phase 1: Recruiting and/or mapping key actors

- Mapping religious leaders and traditional chiefs to document how they are organized and thus identify the extent of their spheres of influence.
- Close engagement with relevant ministries to select leaders and create a strong and effective network of Christian, Muslim and/or traditional leaders.

Phase 2: Training and capacity building

- Organizing exchanges between leaders from different countries to involve religious communities in SRH (sexual and reproductive health), establish useful links and launch dialogues between religious leaders, government and civil society.
- Training to build the capacity of leaders on SWEDD project themes.
- Technical support for groups of leaders to develop Action Plans or Declarations signed by all.
- Encouraging trained leaders to share their knowledge with other leaders in their country.

Phase 3: Development and adoption of documents for advocacy and social and behaviour change communication (SBCC)

- The development, validation and dissemination of guides, policy documents and advocacy tools by trained leaders to their peers.
- SBCC national media campaigns on reproductive health, girls' education, child marriage and the empowerment of women and girls.

Phase 4: Monitoring, evaluation and sustainability of engaging leaders

- Lack of relevant data on the performance of these leaders in their respective countries as part of the SWEDD project.
- Learning about the importance of involving leaders, not only during campaigns but also afterwards.

According to the literature:

Faith-based organizations form a vast and complex tapestry with mandates, services and ways of working ranging from action to promote SRH and the empowerment of women and young people to action against them. There are many untruths based on incorrect information or interpretations about faith and SRH services. Guidance and training for religious leaders and traditional chiefs have enabled them to play their role as agents of change more effectively.

Adedini et al 2018; Marshall, 2015



The role of religion and tradition is crucial in promoting the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women and the demographic dividend in the Sahel. Religious beliefs, norms and practices play an important and complex role in the choices and behaviour of individuals and communities. From its inception in 2015, the SWEDD project saw the need to engage with the religious leaders and traditional chiefs of the countries in order to strengthen or support arguments in favour of human dignity and freedom, including gender equality.



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“.....
...we educate them with Koranic verses and hadiths...that Islam is not for suffering.
Religious leader
”

SUMMARY OF KEY LESSONS

Phase 1: Mapping and/or recruitment	1	Conduct a rigorous mapping of these guarantors of tradition and culture, i.e. religious and traditional chiefs, to find out how they are organized and how they operate.
Phase 2: Guidance and training for leaders	2	Provide training and/or capacity-building for traditional and religious leaders both in and outside the country on the themes of promoting the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women and the demographic dividend.
	3	Encourage experience-sharing between religious and traditional leaders across countries on these issues.
	4	Address the challenges faced by some religious and traditional leaders, which prevent them from becoming more involved in SWEDD activities.
Phase 3: Development and adoption of advocacy and communication documents	5	Set up and promote regional and national databases of guiding documents and the communication and policy materials produced by religious and traditional leaders on adolescent girls and young women.
	6	Promote the involvement of religious and traditional leaders in the project’s SBCC activities aimed at improving the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women.
Phase 4: Monitoring, evaluation and sustainability	7	Develop monitoring and evaluation indicators to monitor, evaluate and document the activities of religious and traditional leaders.
	8	Enhance the integration of religious and traditional leaders into and across project activities.
	9	Establish a long-term partnership between religious and traditional leaders and the Project Management Units (PMUs).

Sources: Adedini SA, Babalola S, Ibeawuchi C, Omotoso O, Akiode A, Odeku M. Role of religious leaders in promoting contraceptive use in Nigeria: evidence from the Nigerian Urban Reproductive Health Initiative. *Glob Health Sci Pract.* 2018;6(3):500-514. <https://doi.org/10.9745/GHSP-D-18-00135>; Katherine Marshall. World Faiths Development Dialogue. Religious engagement in family planning policies: Experience in six Muslim-majority countries. Oct 2015. <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/religious-engagement-in-family-planning-policies>. Accessed on 11 February 2023.

This brief is based on a guide that sets out in detail the process for engaging religious and traditional leaders. It has been developed by Johns Hopkins University with the technical support of UNFPA and the World Bank.

For more information on the documentation of the processes involved in this intervention and on the SWEDD project, visit the SWEDD project’s virtual resource platform: www.sweddknowledge.org