

## Engaging Religious Leaders in the Fight Against COVID19

Adapted from

*“The joint statement from UNICEF and religions for peace 7 April 2020”*

*“Safe Ramadan practices in the context of the COVID-19 – World Health Organization 15 April 2020”*

*Faith and Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities*

### Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented the world with an unprecedented global challenge, touching every community in every nation. The pandemic is causing systems of work, education, finance and domestic lives to grind to a halt, affecting nearly every aspect of people’s lives. As we approach the Holy month of Ramadan, we need to all join efforts and support each other during these trying times. Ramadan brings together families and friends to break their fast, however in the current circumstances, gatherings are to be avoided in order to protect loved ones. Religious leaders have a big role to play in engaging communities in the fight against COVID19. We need to join efforts during this Holy month and show solidarity with the communities we serve.

### 1- Joining forces during the Holy month of Ramadan

As the pandemic continues, we are particularly aware of the increased vulnerability of children, families and in particular girls. Children are facing a range of challenges to their health and safety: school closures, high levels of emotional distress, higher risks of violence and increased food insecurity. We are also seeing an increase in the number of orphans and in the incidence of other diseases due to the break in vaccination services. We are also seeing a growing need for financial and material support for households hardest hit by loss of income and resulting strains.

UNICEF and WHO encourage religious leaders to take action in adopting the Ministry of Public Health guidance’s on physical distancing, promoting hygiene and healthy behaviors, protecting and caring for the most vulnerable, promoting solidarity and social support for the most in need, encouraging positive parenting, dialogue with children and youth, preventing violence and reducing stigma and discrimination (for more details refer to annex page 4).

### 2- Public health advice for social and religious practices and gatherings during the Holy month of Ramadan

The holy month of Ramadan is marked by social and religious gatherings where Muslim families and friends unite to break their fast together, after sunset during iftar or before dawn during suhour. This year Ramadan falls between late April and late May as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. The transmission of COVID-19 is facilitated by close contact between people, as the virus is spread through respiratory droplets and contact with contaminated surfaces. Physical distancing measures, closing of mosques, monitoring of public gatherings and other restrictions on movement, will have positive implications on the prevention of the spread of the virus.

### A. Informed decision making for conducting religious and social gatherings

Cancelling social and religious gatherings should be seriously considered. Virtual alternatives using platforms such as television, radio, digital, and social media can be used instead.

The Ministry of Public Health should be considered the primary source of information and advice regarding physical distancing and other measures related to COVID-19 in the context of Ramadan. Compliance with these established measures should be assured. Religious leaders should be actively engaged in communicating any decision affecting events connected with Ramadan.

### B. General considerations During Ramadan

#### Physical distancing

- Always practice physical distancing by strictly maintaining a distance of at least a meter and a half between people.
- Use culturally and religiously sanctioned greetings that avoid physical contact, such as waving, nodding, or placing the hand over the heart.
- Stop large numbers of people gathering in places associated with Ramadan activities, such as entertainment venues, markets, and shops.

#### Advice to high-risk groups

- Urge people who are feeling unwell or have any symptoms of COVID-19 to follow the national guidance on follow-up and management of symptomatic cases.
- Urge older people and anyone with pre-existing medical conditions (such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer) to adopt preventive measures, as they are considered vulnerable to severe disease and death from COVID-19.

#### Charity

When the faithful give special attention to those who may be adversely affected while distributing their *sadaqat* or *zakah* during this Ramadan, consider the physical distancing measures in place. To avoid the crowded gathering associated with *iftar* banquets, consider using individual pre-packaged boxes/servings of food. These can be organized by centralized entities and institutions, which should adhere to physical distancing throughout the whole cycle (collecting, packaging, storing and distribution).

### C. Well-being

#### Fasting

No studies of fasting and risk of COVID-19 infection have been performed. Healthy people should be able to fast during this Ramadan as in previous years, while COVID-19 patients should consult with their doctors regarding fasting-related decisions, as they would do with any other disease.

#### Physical activity

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people are restricted in their movements; but, if restrictions allow, always practice physical distancing and proper hand hygiene even during any exercise activity. In lieu of outdoor activities, indoor physical movement and online physical activity classes are encouraged.

### **Healthy diet and nutrition**

Proper nutrition and hydration are vital during the month of Ramadan. People should eat a variety of fresh and unprocessed foods every day and drink plenty of water.

### **Tobacco use**

Tobacco use is ill-advised under any circumstances, especially during Ramadan and the COVID-19 pandemic. Frequent smokers may already have lung disease, or reduced lung capacity, which greatly increases the risk of serious COVID-19 illness. When smoking cigarettes, the fingers (and possibly contaminated cigarettes) touch the lips, which increases the likelihood of the virus entering the respiratory system. When waterpipes are used, it is likely that mouth pieces and hoses are shared, which also facilitates transmission of the virus.

### **Promoting mental and psychosocial health**

Despite the different execution in practices this year, it is important to reassure the faithful that they can still reflect, improve, pray, share, and care – all from a healthy distance. Ensuring that family, friends, and elders are still engaged in light of physical distancing needs to be considered; encouraging alternate and digital platforms for interaction is paramount. Disseminating messages of hope and comfort which promote patience among people, and contribute to achieving public well-being.

## **Annex: Joining efforts during the Holy Month of Ramadan**

This section of the document calls Religious leaders, Faith institutions with governments, UN agencies, and broad civil society organizations, to join forces to:

### **ADAPT:**

- International and national health authorities' guidance on public gatherings, physical distancing and other critical matters of public health related to faith community gatherings, group prayers in places of worship, services and rituals such as funerals, marriages and births for the health and safety of religious followers while developing alternative pastoral approaches.

### **PROMOTE:**

- Hygiene and sanitation in keeping with religious teachings and sacred texts that emphasize cleanliness as an element of holiness.
- Listening, to children and families, through organized spaces for dialogue on-line and through media
- Intergenerational dialogue to give voice to girls, boys together with parents and communities to find solutions to issues surrounding the epidemic.
- Voices of faith and wider community engagement to inform local responses as well as national policymaking and programmes.
- Care and attention for the most vulnerable people, especially children, women, persons with disabilities, orphans, and persons at risk of violence and neglect.
- Encourage solidarity, cooperation and social solidarity to support poor people and families, especially those who have lost their jobs and livelihoods due to the state of emergency.
- Promote positive parenting, family dialogue, protection from violence.

### **COUNTER**

- All forms of stigma and discrimination associated with transmission of the disease with active promotion of attitudes and behaviours to uphold the dignity and rights of all people.

### **PROVIDE**

- Active engagement of networks of religious communities including women, and youth, in collaboration with municipalities, to provide organized voluntary services in:
- Spiritual and emotional care and support for parents, children, the elderly and those experiencing disruption and distress in order to provide a source of support, peace, comfort and hope.
- Positive age-specific and gender-responsive parenting guidance and support to families in relation to the health, development, protection and social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people, particularly those in low-income families and those most vulnerable and hardest to reach.
- Youth-friendly communication and engagement including their support with more systematic use of technology and social media as a connective communication platform for communities during periods of physical distancing and beyond.