

Why involve religious leaders?

In many parts of the world, religious leaders are highly influential in their communities. In the province of Maguindanao in the Philippines, where Islam is not only a religious but a way of life, the role of muslim leaders is far-reaching. This is why CRS and its partners turned to them for help in reaching people infected with tuberculosis (TB).

In March 2008, over 150 leaders from different municipalities participated in an orientation workshop in Cotabato City. In a public demonstration of their support, the leaders signed a Pledge of Commitment to help fight TB through a CRS-supported project, the Manguindanao Tuberculosis Control Program (MTCP).

What was the strategy?

The project equipped religious leaders with accurate information about TB, thereby giving them the ability to inform people about the illness and to encourage those experiencing symptoms to seek diagnosis and treatment. The involvement of religious leaders also reduced the stigma surrounding tuberculosis and helped people undergoing treatment to follow their protocol.



Ustadz Serad, a muslim religious leader in Parang, sticks his pledge to the wall to confirm his participation in the campaign against tuberculosis. Photo: Armin Hautea

As a Muslim, Ustadz Serad is on a continuous quest for knowledge. For this reason, he readily agreed to join a meeting on tuberculosis as part of the observation of World TB Day 2009. With what he learned, Mr. Serad began to talk about TB during his mohadarrah (sermon), before salah (prayer). He encouraged people with symptoms of TB to seek treatment at the Rural Health Units.

“I am just one,” he says, “but still I am one with faculties, influence and responsibilities to educate my community about tuberculosis.”

Contribution of religious leaders in selected health units

Rural Health Units	TOTAL (+)	Muslim Religious Leaders		
		Referred	Found (+)	%
Buluan	94			no data
Datu Piang	43	15	1	2%
DSA	27	26	5	18%
Datu Unsay	10	1	1	10%
Guindulungan	38	2	1	3%
North Upi	52	8	4	8%
Shariff Aguak	43	2	1	2%
Sultan Sa Barongis	33	1	0	0
Sultan Mastura	39	3	1	3%
Talayan	34	7	1	3%

Equipped with basic information about tuberculosis, religious leaders participated in information campaigns sponsored by Rural Health Units (RHU) in mosques during Fridays and in mahad/Arabic schools. They also helped encourage individuals with symptoms to seek medical care at the RHU, leading to an increase in referrals to clinics by muslim religious leaders. In fact, the Municipality of Rajah Buayan reported a jump in case detection rates of 14 percent in 2007 to 68 percent in 2008, and attributes the increase to referrals by muslim religious leaders.



Over 150 religious leaders pledged to support the fight against TB in their respective mosques. Photo by Melindi Malang.

What were the obstacles?

Unlike other mainstream religions, Islam does not have a formally defined ecclesiastical organization. Therefore muslim religious leaders had to be approached individually, adding to the complexity of the project.



In western Philippines, women and children are often the last to be tested and treated for TB. Photo: CRS staff

Looking ahead

By organizing various community groups, the Maguindanao Tuberculosis Control Program (MTCP) demonstrated that communities themselves can be effective, active participants in controlling TB. With training, community groups helped identify people with TB symptoms and encouraged health-seeking behaviors. Once diagnosed, TB clients received better quality care with the full support of their community. Treatment outcomes were improved, and patients were empowered to determine the best type of care for their families and for themselves. The community approach also raised general awareness about the disease and resulted in less stigmatization.

The MTCP experience showed that people can be motivated to act with true charity. Despite difficult circumstances, armed conflict, poverty, forbidding terrain and inhospitable weather, there are many who can and will put aside their own interests to serve and help others.

Though the CRS-supported project involving muslim religious leaders ended in September 2009, the leaders are continuing to use religious gatherings at mosques to disseminate Tb messages and encourage people with symptoms to seek care. In October 2009, the MCPT was granted the International Relief and Development Project of the Year award by Project Manager Today magazine.