



ASSOCIAZIONE COMUNITÀ PAPA GIOVANNI XXIII



The Promotion and Protection of the Right to Health of People Living with HIV: the Engagement of Faith-Inspired Organizations

Joint Statement at the 20th Regular Session of the UN Human Rights Council (June 2012) - Item 3 General Debate, submitted by Caritas Internationalis (International Confederation of Catholic Charities), and subsequently affirmed by Association Points-Cœur, Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII, Company of the Daughters of Charity of Vincent of Paul, Dominicans for Justice and Peace (Order of Preachers), Fondazione Marista per la Solidarietà Internazionale ONLUS, International Association of Charities, International Council of Catholic Men, International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations, International Volunteerism Organization for Women, Education, Development, Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice delle Salesiane di Don Bosco, Mouvement International d'Apostolate des Milieux Sociaux Independants, New Humanity, World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, and World Youth Alliance.

The lack of attention to the role of Faith-Inspired Organizations in the promotion and protection of the Right to Health for all, in particular for people living with HIV, including children living with HIV or HIV/TB co-infection, can result in concomitant neglect of the basic survival and quality of life needs of adults and children living with or affected by such catastrophic pandemics such as HIV and AIDS.

Caritas Internationalis (International Confederation of Catholic Charities), on behalf of some 24 million persons served annually by its 164 member organizations throughout the world, joins with **Association Points-Coeur, Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII, Company of the Daughters of Charity of Vincent of Paul, Dominicans for Justice and Peace (Order of Preachers), Fondazione Marista per la Solidarietà Internazionale ONLUS, International Association of Charities, International Council of Catholic Men, International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations, International Volunteerism Organization for Women, Education, Development, Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice delle Salesiane di Don Bosco, Mouvement International d'Apostolate des Milieux Sociaux Independants, New Humanity, World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, and World Youth Alliance** in calling this august Council and its Special Procedures, in the course of defending the Right to Health for all, to focus additional attention on Faith-Inspired Organizations as key stakeholders in this regard, since their engagement is based upon an approach that respects and is rooted in the dignity of every human being.

Faith-Inspired Organizations are present in local communities literally everywhere people live their lives, with enormous outreach as well as "in reach" (capacity to influence and challenge their own members). Their communication, networking, and leadership capacity represent a strong potential asset if used as part of a comprehensive response to HIV and AIDS, locally as well as nationally and globally. Faith-Inspired Organizations are substantial partners in delivery of care, treatment and support in the most rural areas and poorest neighbourhoods of the world; many religious communities are also havens of refuge for people living with or affected by HIV and AIDS, both as places for positive living and for palliative care in the last phase of life¹.

Catholic Church-related organisations have been involved in a comprehensive HIV and AIDS response since the early 1980s, and currently have active programmes in at least 114 countries worldwide. Such organisations are based in - or have enjoyed a - long-term presence in most countries where they work, are engaged in comprehensive care and support, and are deeply rooted in the communities they serve - thereby making them an integral part of the global HIV and AIDS response. Such organizations are rooted in local structures and therefore have demonstrated their excellent potential to mobilize communities to respond to the HIV and AIDS crisis.

In many cases, religious organizations and people of faith were among the first to

¹ Msgr. Robert J. Vitillo, *The Role of National Episcopal Conferences: Coordination, Networking, and Capacity-Building*, in SECAM, "Good Practices" in the Catholic Church's Response to HIV and AIDS in Africa: Implementing the SECAM Action Plan.

respond to the basic needs of people affected by HIV, and indeed have pioneered much of the community-based work. As Dr. Kevin De Cock, Director of WHO Department of HIV/AIDS in 2007 said, "*faith-based organizations are a vital part of civil society. [...] Since they provide a substantial portion of care in developing countries, often reaching vulnerable populations living under adverse conditions, FBOs must be recognized as essential contributors towards universal access efforts.*"² Furthermore, Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, recently emphasized that "*millions of people around the world living with and affected by HIV are being supported by Catholic health care organizations. The full engagement of the Catholic Church in efforts to achieve zero new HIV infections among children is of paramount importance*"³.

Faith-Inspired Organizations are uniquely well placed to reach people to provide a range of services to those in need. In Africa, such organizations were on the 'front lines' as soon as the epidemic became known. Untold numbers of religious leaders, and their followers, responded immediately to the imperative of providing care and education to the human family in order to prevent the further spread of HIV. Many others mounted a non-judgmental compassionate response without questioning how those seeking their help became infected with the virus⁴.

Such deep-rooted action in the most disadvantaged areas of the world, *inter alia*, puts Faith-Inspired Organizations in direct contact with the poorest of the world. This position helps such organizations to form strategic partnerships with persons living with or affected by HIV in an effort to articulate their needs, advocate for their rights before relevant inter-governmental and multilateral organizations. For example, in 2009 Caritas Internationalis launched its "HAART for Children" Campaign, an advocacy effort that urges governments and pharmaceutical firms to take action in order to advance, defend, and protect the Right to Health of children living with HIV or HIV/TB co-infection. Through this campaign, directly inspired by observed needs in all parts of the world, Caritas promotes the elimination of HIV transmission from mother-to-child and of access to antiretroviral treatment for children already infected with HIV in order to keep them healthy and thus avoid the needless suffering and untimely deaths among such children. The campaign calls on governments and pharmaceutical companies to develop and provide child-friendly HIV and TB medicines, especially for infants; to further develop low cost testing methods to diagnose such infections, especially in low-income areas; and to scale up programmes aimed at preventing vertical transmission from HIV-positive mothers to their babies, during pregnancy, labour, delivery, or breastfeeding.

Among the civil society organizations promoting the Right to Health and assuring health care within various national systems, the programmes sponsored by the Catholic Church and other Faith-Inspired Organizations stand out as key good practice models. However, despite the excellent and documented record in the field of

² WHO Media Centre, *Faith-Based Organizations Play a Major Role in HIV/AIDS Care and Treatment in sub-Saharan Africa*, February 8, 2007.

³ UNAIDS Feature Story, *UNAIDS Requests Pope Benedict XVI for Support in Efforts to Stop New HIV Infections in Children*, April 11, 2012.

⁴ UNAIDS Best Practice Collection, *A Faith-Based Response to HIV in Southern Africa: the Choose to Care Initiative*, December 2006.

HIV service delivery and primary health care, Faith-Inspired Organizations do not receive an equitable attention and share of the resources designated to support global, national and local health initiatives.