



## SUCCESS STORY

# Religious Leaders Help Deliver Health Messages



Photo: Nasser El Kholy, ESD Project

*Yemeni religious leader (left) and Christian Coptic leader from Egypt during observational study tour, November 2006*

Religious leaders are trusted and respected in communities throughout the world. In many areas of Asia and the Near East, women, men, and young people go to them for advice and guidance on family and personal matters, including decisions about health.

In 2006, the Asia/Near East Bureau of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided funding to USAID's Extending Service Delivery (ESD) Project to undertake a regional religious leaders initiative. In Yemen, the project is providing gender- and culture-sensitive training in reproductive health/family planning (RH/FP) topics to local male and female Islamic leaders. As a result, many leaders now realize they can be a valuable resource for the health and development needs, as well as the spiritual needs, of their communities.

The training covered such topics as birth spacing, family planning methods, sexually transmitted infections, breastfeeding, gender-related violence, reproductive anatomy and physiology, and Islamic perspectives. The trainers began the session with information on the high numbers of Yemeni women and infants who die of pregnancy-related causes and the role of family planning in preventing these deaths. The leaders heard explanations from the Quran on why these are important issues for Muslim communities.

An important follow-up to the training was a study tour that sent the Yemeni religious leaders to Egypt to observe local religious leaders disseminating RH/FP messages. Participants brought their new skills and observations back and are training other local religious leaders in Yemen. Plans are under way to replicate the religious leaders program in other countries in USAID's Asia/Near East region, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the Philippines.

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