

The Caravan: a strategy to educate Muslim religious leaders and communities on family planning

The Caravan is a faith-based initiative to stimulate social norm change among faith leaders and their institutions and communities. A multidisciplinary team of experts travels, as in a caravan, to different areas to deliberate with religious leaders on reproductive health and population issues, including family planning. The Caravan makes it possible to address misconceptions about, and resistance against, family planning and motivates Muslim religious leaders and communities to become champions of family planning. It has been implemented in over five countries in Africa.



The role of religious leaders is not restricted to performing religious duties; it also includes educating people on various areas, including on medical, social, cultural and religious issues. Family planning has been a sensitive issue among religious leaders and communities and is sometimes interpreted as a method imposing family limitation and population control, and working against Islam. In travelling seminars, or 'caravans', on family planning, a multidisciplinary team of experts travels to an area to deliberate with religious leaders on reproductive health and population issues, including family planning. The aim is to increase acceptance of reproductive health as a community responsibility and to increase uptake of SRH services. The first seminar was held in Indonesia; this was followed by seminars in Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, Somalia, Senegal, Gambia, Nigeria, Kenya, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, and with Muslim minorities in Thailand and the Philippines. While the first seminars focused on family planning, consequent ones have had a broader scope, including issues related to reproductive health, gender and health, child marriage and FGM, GVAW and adolescent health, taking into account the critical challenges in particular settings and international policies.



Learning caravan on child spacing in the Islamic context, Mombasa, 2015

Muslim communities are open to advice from Al Azhar University, and want to implement its recommendations

Caravans are facilitated by a group of experts with backgrounds in demography, medicine, social sciences and theology. Each expert prepares a presentation that deals with family planning (or another topic) from their perspective. Depending on their expertise, they may address demographic aspects of overpopulation; the impact of frequent pregnancies, lack of spacing and young age at childbirth on the health of the mother; and the value of small families and the comparative advantages for education and working opportunities. Theologians talk about the Islamic perspective, supported by authenticated texts from the Quran and the Hadith. For each caravan, time is taken to establish the group, select the experts, share and debate perspectives among experts and

come to an agreement regarding the presentations and information materials and facilitation methods. At the end of the caravan, the expert group formulates recommendations. The caravan approach has been particularly effective because it was developed and tested by a renowned institute, the International Islamic Centre for Population Studies and Research of Al-Azhar University. Since Al-Azhar University is the most prestigious and the oldest in the Muslim world, religious leaders in the respective Muslim countries are open to advice and willing to receive the caravan and implement its recommendations. The reputation of the Centre also means that caravans in many countries are patronised by presidents or deputy-presidents (Indonesia, Somalia) or high-ranking officials, who actively support and legitimise the seminars.



Learning caravan: Al Azhar scholars advising Kenyan women on child spacing, 2015

In August 2015, the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims and the Faith to Action Network in partnership with Al-Azhar University organised a learning caravan in the counties of Mombasa, Kilifi and Lamu. The caravan included processions, training workshops, sessions at the mosques, sermons and seminars, meetings and discussions with government officials and service providers in public and private health facilities aimed at generating support for SRHR advocacy, policy influencing and embracing reproductive health programming in line with the Islamic faith. Multiple topics were addressed, such as family planning, safe motherhood, harmful traditional practices and adolescent pregnancy. For each of these, supporting audio-visual and written materials were developed. By combining medical and theological points of view to complement each other, the Caravan has helped dispel rumours

and correct misconceptions about family planning. The theological perspective has been particularly helpful in informing participants about texts in the Quran related to reproductive health. According to a facilitator, 'Where beliefs are so strong, people tend to listen better to a religious leader than to a medical person.' The Quran, for instance, emphasises that people are given the power to think for themselves and have the choice to take responsibility. The medical perspective complements this with insights on the risks of having too many, too soon, too early or too late pregnancies. Maternal and child health and family health and well-being are taken as a starting point to discuss issues related to reproductive health. Rather than 'family planning', the term 'birth spacing' or 'child spacing' is used adopted as a socially and culturally accepted term.



Learning caravan: organizing seminars, advocacy and awareness creation, Mombasa, 2015

In 2017, an evaluation of the Caravan took place. This reported, among other things, an increase in the uptake of family planning services in Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims facilities; an increase in budget for family planning at county government level; and the adoption by 63 imams of a joint commitment in support of child spacing. The project has also resulted in the awarding of scholarships to 20 Muslim clergy to study for 2 months at Al-Azhar on women's rights and child spacing and 20 academic scholarships for religious and other courses related to reproductive health.

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