

Faith-based groups propel development, says head of UN population agency



UNFPA Executive Director Thoraya Ahmed Obaid

4 August 2009 – Faith-based groups play a key role in promoting development, the head of the United Nations Population Fund (**UNFPA**) has said, stressing the need for stepped-up cooperation between the world body and religious organizations in boosting the welfare of the most vulnerable.

UNFPA is cognizant of “the profound moral authority that religious leaders have” and is aware of “the fact that religious organizations are the older social service providers humankind has known,” Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, the agency’s Executive Director, said at a round table discussion yesterday with faith-based organizations.

Between 30 and 60 per cent of basic healthcare services in the developing world are provided by such groups, according to the UN World Health Organization (**WHO**), while the **World Bank** has found that in some instances, health and education services offered by the religious organizations are better than those of governments.

Given this evidence, “systematic, deliberate and focused” engagement between faith-based groups and the UN is crucial, Ms. Obaid said at the gathering in New York.

“Ad-hoc partnerships, and ones where the United Nations is a donor and the faith-based organization is one of many civil society partners, can be lost opportunities,” she cautioned.

Therefore, the official said, a studied approach focusing on “culturally sensitive development” is essential to enhance any collaboration between the UN and religious groups to promote human rights.

Areas ripe for cooperation include HIV/AIDS, women’s empowerment, maternal health, migration, humanitarian relief, reproductive health and gender-based violence, Ms. Obaid emphasized.