

24 May 2011

"The same mosquito can go to mosque on Friday and church on Sunday. If a mosquito can work interfaith, then so can we."

–Peter Salifu of NIFAA, speaking on Thursday to a crowd of more than 100 Muslim and Christian faith leaders, representatives from NGOs and the Ministry of Health in Sierra Leone, about the groundbreaking work going on in Nigeria for interfaith health messaging on malaria.

Watching the buzz build up in the room about the potential of replicating this event, it felt like the beginning of something powerful - a growing realisation that faith leaders can play an essential role in health messaging. They have the trust, the community links, the platform and the recognition to spread key preventative messages about this devastating but preventable disease to their congregations.

Malaria is one of the biggest killers of children under five in Sierra Leone.

Our Faiths Act in Sierra Leone project aims to save lives by working with faith leaders to spread malaria prevention messages across the population. Last week we ran a three-day workshop which provided the space and time for faith leaders, ministry colleagues and other health leaders to plan an initial programme of education and training that will support existing efforts in halting and reversing the spread of malaria in Sierra Leone.

[You can find out more by reading our diary from Sierra Leone as our staff set up the first Faiths Act workshop in Freetown.](#)

There is no disputing the enormous health challenge in Sierra Leone. The statistics we heard last week from Dr Samuel Smith, the manager of the National Malaria Control Programme, speak for themselves.

There is a huge shortage of health care professionals, with under 150 doctors in government hospitals. The child mortality rate is one of the highest in the world: 192 out of every 1000 children die each year. Malaria is responsible for 29 percent of all deaths among children under five in Sierra Leone, yet only around 26 percent of young people sleep under treated bed nets. (WHO 2008)

But as loudly as these statistics send a message, so too do the words of hope and purpose from the country's faith leaders.

Rev. Usman Fornah, standing alongside Sheikh Abubakarr Conteh - both of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone - said last week:

"Both our main faiths teach protection of our children, who suffer worst. We will grasp this opportunity to eliminate this killer and debilitating disease in all our work, right across the country." Working together with the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone and the Ministry of Health and Sanitation to train and empower faith leaders, we hope we can turn that faith into concrete health outcomes.

Best,

Danny Richmond
Faiths Act Team