Religious Leaders Combat TB in Tajikistan

It takes more than just doctors to cure TB; it takes a whole community. My job is not only to contribute to the spiritual wellbeing of my community but also to its health through support of TB patients and breaking stigma towards those who are affected by this disease.

Karimjon Roziqov

Every week, Karimjon Roziqov, an imam in a mosque in Tajikistan’s mountainous Rasht district, looks forward to Friday. Residents in his community call him domullo or "teacher" and on Fridays, after the prayer service at his mosque, he sets aside 15 minutes to talk to them about tuberculosis (TB). In predominantly Muslim Tajikistan, mosques are an effective way to reach communities, especially those in remote areas where access to print and broadcast media is limited, with important public health messages.

Though talking about infectious diseases like TB is never easy, religious leaders like Domullo Karimjon have been making great strides in breaking the taboo. “I kept asking myself, why should we keep silent about TB? This is a disease that impacts the lives of so many even though it is entirely preventable and curable and treatment is free in Tajikistan,” he reflects. In 2016, Domullo Karimjon heard that USAID was establishing community health committees in his district through its TB Control Program. He decided to learn more and, after meeting with committee representatives, he soon joined the committee.

Trained members of the community health committees provide a strong bridge between healthcare providers and communities and play a crucial role in TB awareness, breaking down the stigma and myths surrounding it. They also advocate with local authorities and local businesses to provide financial support to TB patients in need. Even though TB treatment is free, financial support from communities provides patients with income they might lose if TB treatment leaves them unable to work.

Since 2015, USAID has established 143 community health committees in Tajikistan and trained more than 800 members in 27 districts and towns on how to prevent TB, detect TB symptoms, and encourage patients to seek testing and treatment. In 2017 alone, trained community health committee members like Domullo Karimjon helped 80 patients receive TB testing and enroll in treatment.

Now, Domullo Karimjon’s mosque, which has almost 500 worshippers every Friday, serves as an effective place for the community to receive crucial information about TB. He even provides his cell phone number for residents who, due to pervasive TB stigma, especially in rural areas, prefer private counseling outside of the mosque.

Thanks to the USAID training on TB control, Domullo Karimjon recently recognized TB symptoms in a man who returned home from work abroad. Domullo Karimjon encouraged the man to get tested and he is now receiving treatment and is on the road to full recovery.
USAID supports the Tajikistan Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population in implementing the National TB Program by providing more effective and accessible TB prevention, diagnosis, and treatment for all, including vulnerable populations. The main objective of the five-year, $13.2 million USAID TB Control Program is to reduce the burden of tuberculosis and prevent multidrug-resistant forms of the disease. The program covers a wide range of activities, including training health care workers to strengthen the health system; expanding interagency coordination and cooperation; and improving timely access to TB diagnosis and treatment. The program runs from September 2014 to August 2019.