

The inclusion of religious minorities in consultative and decision-making bodies

Who are religious minorities?

The term “religious minorities” encompasses a broad range of religious communities, traditional and non-traditional, recognized by the State or not, large and small, which seek protection of their rights under minority rights standards. The diversity that exists within minority religious groups must be recognized. Religious minorities may also be national, ethnic or linguistic minorities.

Why should religious minorities participate in decision-making?

Minority rights extend the protection of religious minorities and complement instruments concerned with freedom of religion or belief including as regards the effective participation of minorities in decisions affecting them. The minority rights standards emphasise the effective participation of religious minorities in decisions which affect them and their full participation in the progress and development of their country.

The Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, inspired by article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, establishes the responsibility of States to protect religious identity of minorities and to encourage conditions for its promotion.

The Minorities Declaration further calls for State cooperation with religious minorities on questions relating to them in order to “promote mutual understanding and confidence”, as well as advancing respect for their rights. These rights complement, and go beyond, freedom of religion and religious identity.

Participation of minorities in various areas of life is essential for the development of a truly inclusive society. It is through effective participation that a person belonging to a religious minority expresses and protects her or his identity. Measures required to improve participation of minorities in social, cultural and political life are to take into account the historical, cultural and religious contexts of a given country. Notwithstanding distinctions in circumstances, certain practices or initiatives that work in a given context may be drawn upon in another, and prove to be effective.

How the participation of religious minorities facilitates conflict prevention?

Lack of participation of religious minorities can result in increased vulnerability to violence, discrimination, exclusion and other human rights violations. Tensions between communities or violations of the rights of persons belonging to religious minorities are at the root of a significant number of conflicts.

The effective and meaningful participation of minorities in the political arena can be a pivotal element in avoiding violent conflict; however the reality is often quite different.

Societies in which mechanisms are in place allowing minorities to practice their culture and religion, and participate in political and economic life on an equal footing with the rest of the population, are less likely to be societies in which tensions emerge and deteriorate into violent conflict.

Minorities are underrepresented in the political processes and governing institutions in many countries because they are intentionally restricted from participation, inadvertently disadvantaged by facially-neutral laws or policies, or because there are structural barriers to their full and equal participation.

Participation in consultative and decision making bodies: positive measures

States should facilitate the establishment of bodies and mechanisms aimed at creating a space for discussions and exchanges on issues relevant to religious minorities. They should promote the participation of religious communities in public dialogue and implement the general principles of equality and non-discrimination. They should, through participatory processes with religious minority groups, adopt measures to improve respect for all human rights of persons belonging to religious minorities.

The participation of women and young people belonging to religious minorities should be particularly encouraged and ensured through active outreach.

There is a need to introduce specific measures to ensure consultation with and participation of all religious minorities at all levels of the society. States should promote equitable access for religious minorities to information and communications technologies, including the internet and online social media, as a vehicle for the dissemination of information and sharing of good practices.

Obstacles hindering religious minorities' participation in consultative structures

Specialized bodies can play a crucial role in advancing the protection of religious minorities. However, there are States that limit protection only to specific minorities or design consultative structures based exclusively on ethnic or linguistic criteria resulting in restrictions for religious minorities. Some countries have specialized bodies that operate with a mandate that covers ethnic but not religious minorities. In other cases, consultative mechanisms exist but are restricted to minorities belonging to those religions recognized by States.

The work of OHCHR

The 2013 UN Forum on Minority Issues was for the first time devoted to guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities. Some of the recommendations focused on the need for States to engage in open-ended consultations with the full range of religious minority groups and with wider society on measures to improve respect for all human rights of persons belonging to religious minorities. It further recommended that States should facilitate the establishment of bodies and mechanisms aimed at creating a space for discussions and exchanges on issues relevant to religious minorities.

The Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues has also focused her work on religious minorities. In her 2013 report to the General Assembly she concluded that meaningful consultation with, and the effective participation of, religious minorities in decisions that affect them are fundamental to the protection and promotion of the rights of religious minorities. Positive measures to ensure consultation and participation are required at all levels of society. The inclusion of religious minorities in consultative and decision making bodies helps to ensure that their views, issues and concerns are taken into account.

OHCHR is working to ensure enhanced, coordinated attention to racial discrimination and minority rights throughout the United Nations (UN) system. This includes coordinating the UN Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, launched in 2002. The over 20 UN entities participating in the Network developed a Secretary General's Guidance Note on Racial Discrimination and Minorities, issued in March 2013. The Network is currently implementing the Guidance Note through an action plan to make sure that the recommendations are followed up, including at the national level.

The OHCHR minority fellowship programme provides training to minority advocates, including religious minorities. It is aimed at strengthening the knowledge of representatives of minorities of the United Nations system and mechanisms so they can better promote and protect the rights of their communities.

The OHCHR field presences can also be instrumental in protecting and promoting minority rights as OHCHR is present in almost 60 countries. OHCHR has also provided support to ensure that specific national laws for the protection of religious minorities meet international standards.

Normative standards and further reading

- [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\), \(Articles 27 and 25\)](#)
- [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\) \(Article 30\)](#)
- [Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities \(1992\)](#)
- [Commentary to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities of the Working Group on Minorities, UN Doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.5/2005/2](#)
- [Recommendations of the sixth session of the Forum on Minority Issues: Guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities, A/HRC/25/66](#)
- [Promoting and protecting minority rights: a Guide for advocates](#)
- [Minority rights: international standards and guidance for implementation](#)
- [Guidance Note of the Secretary General on racial discrimination and the protection of minorities](#)