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Search for Common Ground (Asia REF) response to OCHR call for evidence - response to Question 9.

9. How are hatred, intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief monitored – including with data – and how is this evidence base used to counter the negative effects that results? To what extent is this data used as a basis for policy design and implementation?

The [Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom \(REF\)](#) Activity, an Associate Award under the USAID funded Human Rights Support Mechanism, supports efforts by local partners to expand freedom of religion and conscience in Asia, and builds the capacity of local community partners to lead efforts for REF within their countries.

The Asia REF Consortium includes the American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative (ABA ROLI), Freedom House, Internews, Pact, and Search for Common Ground (Search). Through Asia REF, these organizations partner with local actors working on REF in Asia, and each project under the award supports local partners with funding and technical assistance.

The USAID approach to promoting sustainable development prioritizes local ownership, participation, and capacity strengthening. By applying this approach to the Asia REF program, the significance of engaging and collaborating with local stakeholders, including religious leaders and communities, in the development of local indicators for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) projects is emphasized.

The process of localizing indicators aims to honor and recognize local cultural specificities, preferences, and practices, and to understand the local context and the complexities of religious practices, beliefs, and dynamics in the region. It also can strengthen the capacity of local actors and institutions to take the lead in promoting FORB, ensure the relevance and effectiveness of projects, and promote sustainability.

In order to determine how local stakeholders and program participants define “religious freedom”, we use Search for Common Ground’s [Grounded Accountability Model](#) (GAM) as an integral part of the Asia REF approach. GAM is a participatory research approach that engages community members to define everyday indicators of key concepts (such as what Freedom of Religion and Belief means to them in daily life) which inform both program design and interventions, as well as the monitoring, evaluation and learning of programs. We aim to enhance community ownership of peacebuilding, FORB and other development interventions with the help of GAM.



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One of the key principles of the GAM approach is that target communities know best what freedom of religion and belief means to them. Concepts like freedom of religion and belief mean different things to women vs. men, younger vs. older people, ethnic and religious minorities vs. majority groups, established political parties vs emerging political activists and leaders, etc. By adopting this participatory approach and using it at the outset of the program, we can bring in the perspectives of different groups within society, listen to their priorities, needs and concerns and understand what programmatic success would look like for them.

In the Asia REF program, we have used the GAM approach in six countries in Asia to date, including Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Here, we highlight some of the key indicators that we co-developed with local communities in four of the countries, and illustrate how Asia REF partners have used these indicators to shape the design of their projects funded under the consortium.

Kazakhstan

We held two GAM workshops in Kazakhstan, in March 2023, one with the representatives of non-mainstream religious organizations, and one with representatives of NGOs and the expert community. Participants in Kazakhstan generally perceived the FORB dynamics in the country now as more positive than in the Soviet times, although religious minority groups expressed concerns about government restrictions that limit citizens' practices of their religious beliefs in public spaces.

Members of religious minorities shared that they would take the following as the top three indicators as signs of religious freedom:

1. When people in my community believe that religious freedom is guaranteed by the state and international standards to all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation.
2. When believers are able to express their opinion without fearing the consequences for not adhering to existing trends of political correctness.
3. When in a community followers of minority religions are treated with respect by individuals, communities, and government institutions.

Taken together, the indicators overall reflect the local religious minority groups' perspectives on the meaning of religious freedom in Kazakhstan. Since co-creating these indicators, the country team has considered the following programmatic changes/adaptations among others:



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- Adding media literacy programs that educate journalists, media professionals and the general public about religious diversity, cultural sensitivity and combating biases.
- Facilitating interfaith dialogues to encourage understanding, cooperation, and joint efforts to combat Islamophobia, promote tolerance, and address discrimination.
- Providing capacity strengthening programs for law enforcement officials, security personnel, and relevant authorities on human rights, religious diversity, and non-discriminatory practices, to help ensure that counter-terrorism measures are carried out with respect for religious freedom and in compliance with international human rights standards.

In addition to FORB, discussions during both events placed significant emphasis on freedom of speech, which was recognized as an integral aspect of the activities of religious organizations and NGOs. Another major challenge identified for FORB is the widespread lack of awareness about religious minorities. From these workshops and the locally generated indicators, the priorities identified for future Asia REF programming include: legal analysis and proposing reforms, amplifying the visibility and voices of religious minorities, analyzing school and university religious studies programs, and then developing a teaching course on FORB, examining gender and age aspects of FORB, educating civil servants and journalists, and exploring other relevant areas

Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan, the same approach was taken of running one event with NGO representatives, and one with religious minorities.

In the focus group with religious minorities, the top three indicators agreed on were:

1. People from across dividing lines do not oppose individuals practicing their chosen religion.
2. Individuals are able to openly and freely express their religious beliefs without fear or reproach, and without subsequent condemnation or persecution.
3. The government's executive and judicial branches take actions guided solely by existing laws.

In the workshop with civil society/NGO representatives the following were voted as the top three indicators:



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1. The deceased members of religious minority groups are buried in municipal cemeteries nearby their villages.
2. Religious organizations initiate social projects in support of related state programs.
3. Number of children wearing religious symbols who attend schools without restrictions.

In the focus group discussion with representatives of religious minorities, the organizers deliberately did not include representatives of the religious mainstream (who were part of the NGO focus group discussion) to create a more open and safe environment, but representatives of the minority within the majority were invited. According to the participants, this was the first time they had participated in such an event where someone asked them about their daily experience of freedom of religion.

Overall, all participants noted that for them the realization of their right to FORB primarily means safety, absence of fear, and the ability to practice their religious traditions. Both groups highlighted the neutrality of state and law enforcement agencies in carrying out their work and the supremacy of the law as an important indicator of the existence of freedom of religion in the country. Based on the discussions, the facilitators generated localized indicators that take into account the local context, religious, cultural and linguistic diversity, and the specificities of different groups and communities to assess the degree of implementation of FORB rights in the country, to create 20 indicators that were prioritized by participants across both groups.

The localized indicators co-created through the GAM workshop in Kyrgyzstan have been incorporated into the two Asia REF projects. The neutrality of state service was one of the most discussed topics during the GAM workshops conducted in Kyrgyzstan with the participation of local religious minority representatives and CSOs. Search will address this by building the capacity of the State Commission on Religious Affairs to champion impartiality and mainstreaming secularism across state services. Some of the specific GAM Indicators used in the project design include:

- Members of minorities receive support from government entities and law enforcement agencies in cases of appeals
- The state body is the executive and judicial power, takes actions, guided exclusively by the existing law
- Neighbors living on the same street, of different ethnicity (Russians, Dungans, Kyrgyz, Uighurs) jointly perform cultural traditional rites, and/or religious rituals (dye eggs, invite to iftar)
- GAM 1.1 . % of beneficiaries count that The state body including SCRA is takes actions, guided exclusively by the existing law



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Indonesia

In Indonesia again we held two separate consultation/focus group discussions, one with CSOs and members of the religious majority (Islam); and one with representatives of religious minorities. This was to ensure we captured differences of perspective on what freedom and belief means and looks like for the different groups, as well as creating safe spaces for both groups to speak freely.

Civil society representatives and members of the religious majority agreed on these top 3 indicators as signs of religious freedom in their communities:

1. When people can celebrate their religious festivals/activities without any fear and restrictions.
2. When minority communities believe that they can practice their cultural belief system without any fear or threat.
3. When people in my community are heard and included in the decision-making process, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, gender, and age.

Among the religious minority focus group, the following were agreed as the top 3 indicators:

1. When people/students are not discriminated against or bullied based on their identity (race and religion) in school and public places.
2. When politicians do not play the majority-minority card to manipulate and divide people.
3. When people feel that there are enough inclusive and safe interfaith platforms that allow them to interact freely with representatives from different religious, ethnic, and gender affiliations.

Taken together, along with a wide range of other indicators developed, these provide rich material to guide program actions and promote accountability to local communities. These indicators not only reveal the existing challenges related to religious freedom, but insights into potential programmatic interventions in the Indonesian context. For instance, the indicators demonstrate how state structures and politicians sow divides between majority and minority religions and that gender minorities face particular barriers to inclusion. Program interventions based on these findings could in future:

- Address reluctance to acknowledge certain religions and challenges of macro-level change, emphasizing top-down reforms alongside community-level initiatives.



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- Promote grassroots engagement, interfaith dialogues led by religious leaders and the broader community, and the inclusion of people with disabilities in designing places of worship.
- Propose a peace curriculum extending beyond local mediation forums for peaceful coexistence and support against persecution.
- Urge NGOs to develop gender-sensitive Standard Operating Procedures and enhance sensitivity in addressing women-related FORB issues.
- Advocate for journalist education and support to counter biased viewpoints influencing journalistic content.
- Recognize the importance of covering FORB issues in newsrooms, aligning press freedom with freedom of religion and belief to foster open dialogue and understanding.

Learning from these findings, new Asia REF programs in Indonesia are created as programmatic interventions that contribute to achieving religious freedom *as defined by* Indonesian religious communities. For instance, the soon-to-be initiated Strengthening Interfaith Forums and Youth Engagement in Indonesia to Promote Tolerance (SHIFT) project takes into account the need for freedom to celebrate religious festivals/activities without fear and restrictions.

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka the GAM analysis took place in August 2023 in the form of three focus group discussions, one with Civil Society Organisations, one with representatives from the Sinhala Buddhist community, the religious majority, and one with representatives of the religious minorities (Hindu, Muslim and Christian). Key findings were:

The aspects of Language, Law, Policies and Schools emerge as key themes among the top-voted indicators of the FGD represented by Civil Society Organizations. The participants leaned towards broader socio-political and legal factors that play a crucial role in building religious freedom in society. Their focus was on the larger frameworks of laws and policies which are not in alignment with efforts taken by CSOs to promote social cohesion, and can deter success of initiatives and progress of communities.

CSO representatives also focused on the lack of support for the Tamil language. Although both Sinhala and Tamil languages are considered official languages in the Constitution, there is less importance given to teaching or learning the Tamil language. Monolingual Tamil or Sinhala speakers make the social cohesion process more challenging as they are unable to engage with each other in a meaningful manner. The CSO group felt that eradicating the language barrier is key to building a more equal society in which everyone's right to FORB is respected.



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Among the focus group with **religious minorities**, a different set of perspectives and priorities emerged. Participants felt that in a country where one religion (Buddhism) has been so intertwined with the state, less religious involvement in the public space (government office, schools etc.,) and making religion a more private affair, would perhaps be better for pursuing religious freedoms for everyone. Another key focus of the discussion was the deference shown to religious leaders in the public space. A majority of the participants had negative experiences of having to provide deferential treatment to religious figures, especially Buddhist monks. Participants felt this was unnecessary and also shared that the same level of deference is not shown to Muslims Imams or Catholic nuns/Christian priests. Instead of asking for equal places of importance for other religious leaders, participants in this group felt that religious freedoms would be better maintained if religious affiliation was not given undue prominence.

Among the **majority religion** focus group, a further set of perspectives and priorities and themes emerged, encompassing a wide spectrum from domestic environments, educational institutions, media platforms including social media, as well as the role of governmental entities including the State and legislative bodies. This group focused on the importance of instilling values from an early developmental stage from parents and the school. It was observed that prolonged exposure to instances of segregation from an early age tends to normalize societal divisions and inadvertently perpetuates racial prejudices. The group also focused on the role of mainstream media and social media, which have been instrumental in perpetuating narratives that lead to harm and discrimination against people on the basis of religion or ethnicity in Sri Lanka, and the need for religious leaders to use their influence to speak up for peace and religious freedom.

Throughout these discussions, the multifaceted nature of peace and religious freedom was examined, a shared set of indicators was developed encompassing the perspectives of all three groups, and these will inform future Asia REF program design, enabling us to be sensitive to the differences of perspective and needs across different communities within Sri Lanka.

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