FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN PRACTICE

INSIGHTS FOR IMPACT

Learning Review of the CKU FoRB Window and Digni FoRB Project Portfolios (2020–2025)

Commissioning and Funding Organizations

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Acknowledgements

> *This review is a timely and practical resource for those of us advancing FoRB in the Global South. It captures both the challenges and the quiet transformations that take place when values of dignity, coexistence, and justice are lived out in communities. For practitioners and trainers alike, it provides lessons that are deeply grounded in context and rich with hope for more inclusive and peaceful societies.*
>
> *- Fred Nyabera, Advisory Group*

Contents

Acronyms

3R	Reach, Resonance/Relevance, and Response
CKU	Centre for Church-based Development in Denmark
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FoRB	Freedom of Religion or Belief
IRFBA	International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance
KII	Key Informant Interview
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NORFORB	Nordic Ecumenical Network on Freedom of Religion or Belief
PROCMURA	Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa
PHIN	Peace at Heart Initiative Network
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
USCIRF	United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

1. Executive Summary

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This Learning Review examines the portfolios of 42 projects supported by the Centre for Church-based Development in Denmark (CKU) and Digni in Norway from 2020 to 2025, focusing on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) capacity building, learning, and advocacy. The review's objective is to enhance the knowledge base for designing and implementing successful FoRB projects and monitoring their results. It serves as a structured inquiry to strengthen understanding of what contributes to meaningful and context-relevant progress on FoRB, rather than a performance evaluation. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the analysis involved a desk review, an online survey of partners (82% response rate with 41 responses), 31 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with partners across 11 countries, ensuring robust data triangulation and validation. From the data collected, the review documented outcomes, identified good practices, and assessed Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) and knowledge management practices.

The projects under review operate within a common framework, despite varying locations, target groups, and approaches. Key characteristics include operating in restrictive environments, high levels of trust between local partners and grant holders, legitimacy of religious leaders and faith-based organizations, a project-based approach, and a positive personal impact on implementers themselves. Core thematic areas across the portfolio include:

- Promotion of FoRB literacy
- Gender equality and women's rights
- Fostering social cohesion and peaceful coexistence
- Countering religious discrimination and violence
- Youth and children engagement in rights-based dialogue
- Faith-based leadership development
- Civic engagement and democratic participation

Projects contributed to high levels of impact at the individual and local community levels, with **73% of survey respondents believing their projects contributed to improving religious equality and respect for FoRB** (32% very much, 41% moderately). The majority of survey respondents (85%) reported changes in attitudes and beliefs, and more than half (66%) reported changes in behaviors or practices related to FoRB and religious equality. Due to the highly complex and sensitive contexts in which FoRB work operates, only 10% reported change in local policies, rules, or institutions. Analyzing the outcomes achieved across the portfolio, the review identified eight outcome clusters where changes were observed:

1. Changing perceptions of FoRB through contextual framing

2. Religious leaders initiating or modeling inclusive behaviors

3. Youth increase engagement in FoRB dialogue and civic life

4. Women increase agency and participation in FoRB dialogue and leadership

5. Public discourse and media narratives shift toward inclusion and minority rights

6. Interfaith collaboration and institutionalized platforms strengthen

7. Local ownership and sustainability of FoRB initiatives increase

8. Legal empowerment and institutional engagement in FoRB

The diverse strategies and approaches applied by partners were collected and analyzed to document **16 good practices**, related to both effective FoRB advancement approaches, localization, and engagement of target groups. These good practices are coupled with several case studies captured from the projects that illustrate the effective application of these strategies and approaches.

While developing these effective FoRB program practices, strategies, and approaches, partners frequently faced significant challenges spanning restrictive political environments, community suspicion, and backlash, along with deep gender-based and emotional risks for participants, especially women and survivors of trauma. **The primary lesson learned is that effective, safe, and sustainable programming requires an adaptive, incremental approach that prioritizes integrated protection strategies (including robust digital and ethical safeguards, trauma-informed facilitation, and gender-sensitive design) to gradually widen the boundaries of dialogue**.

The external context and challenges of FoRB programs also impacted the MEL approaches and practices applied by projects. The review found effective application of participatory and context-sensitive monitoring, regular review and adaptive learning, mixed-methods evidence gathering, and continuous documentation of stories of change. Across projects MEL faced limitations due to limited capacity and resourcing, complexity in measuring results, need for ethical and contextual sensitivity, and structural limitations in projects.

The analysis of the outcomes, good practices, challenges and lessons learned inform the following recommendations on programmatic, operational, and MEL in the portfolio. For a detailed explanation of the recommendations, please refer to Chapter 9.

PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Facilitate sharing of cross-project learning:** Systematize the sharing of good practices and organize cross-project exchange to allow implementers to localize effective strategies and build a supportive community.

2. **Integrate policy and institutional change pathways:** Work with implementers to integrate strategies for policy and institutional change into project design to link local outcomes with national-level impact for greater sustainability.

3. **Increase paths for normalizing FoRB language:** Create strategies for programs that gradually normalize universal FoRB and human rights language to advance public understanding and support, which is necessary for structural and legal change.

4. **Engage religious majority groups:** Expand engagement to include religious majority groups as partners and participants. This is essential to cultivating an enabling environment where respect for diverse beliefs is a shared social norm, not just a minority concern.

5. **Continue FoRB-focused programs:** Maintain the programmatic focus on FoRB and coordinate with international FoRB networks to advocate for sustained global funding, addressing the risk of shrinking development assistance.

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

6. **Continue flexible and adaptive project management:** Maintain and institutionalize the flexible management approach to allow implementers to successfully respond to external political and security factors and ensure safety.

7. **Engage local partners in multi-year planning:** Ensure long-term strategic discussions include local partners to better inform their resource management and, where possible, extend the funding timeline to allow for more impactful, structural change strategies.

8. **Expand local partnership base to engage emerging groups:** Broaden the partnership network to engage emerging groups to increase the portfolio's reach and expand the capacity and network of local FoRB actors, recognizing that new groups may require additional capacity strengthening.

MEL AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

9. **Create partner-centric and flexible global intermediate results framework:** Create and refine a set of partner-centric intermediate results, using tools for participatory validation, to capture the portfolio's range of FoRB outcomes and ensure partner buy-in.

10. **Develop user-friendly data governance framework and secure shared database:** Establish a collaborative data governance framework for consistency and reliability, and create a systematic, secure online data storage system at the local level to manage sensitive FoRB data and facilitate aggregation.

11. **Develop tools for measuring key outcomes:** Share or develop tailored tools to help implementers measure challenging areas like social norms change and the results of media interventions.

12. **Expand the "L" of MEL:** Include resourced learning agendas in projects and facilitate internal platforms and safe spaces for peer-to-peer sharing and exchange among partners.

13. **Support development of local partner MEL teams:** Provide dedicated funding and capacity building for local partner MEL staff to ensure they have the necessary human resources to adapt and apply improved MEL systems and tools.

The collective achievements highlighted in this review demonstrate the transformative power of FoRB-focused initiatives when they are built on a foundation of trust, collaboration, and locally informed program design. With this strong foundation observed across the portfolio among CKU, Digni, grant holders, and local partners, these recommendations present an opportunity to deepen impact and further advance freedom of religion or belief for all globally.

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2. Introduction

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is a fundamental human right that contributes to sustainable development, social cohesion, and human dignity. Recognizing its significance, donor agencies and civil society organizations have increasingly integrated FoRB into development efforts. The Centre for Church-based Development in Denmark (CKU) and Digni in Norway have been at the forefront of FoRB capacity building, learning, and advocacy for over a decade, particularly through their collaboration within the Nordic Ecumenical Network on Freedom of Religion or Belief (NORFORB).[1] CKU manages the FoRB window on behalf of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, providing grants through Danish member organizations or other civil society organizations who engage local partners. Digni manages funds from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), subgranting their Norwegian member organizations who in turn cooperate with local partners.[2]

This learning review is not intended as a performance evaluation, but rather as a structured inquiry aimed at strengthening collective understanding of what contributes to meaningful and context-relevant progress on FoRB. It is designed to explore how change has happened, identify transferable good practices, and inform future programming, monitoring, and policy engagement. Emphasis is placed on participatory analysis and reflection, rather than judgment or attribution. The review analyzes the portfolios of CKU and Digni-supported projects (January 2020 to March 2025) to synthesize learnings and explore promising approaches.

The overall objective of the learning review is to increase the knowledge base for designing and implementing successful FoRB projects and monitor their results through three elements:

1. **Document outcomes:** Collect, analyze, and document the impact, outcomes and lessons learned from completed and ongoing FoRB projects granted between 2020 and 2025.

2. **Identify good practices:** Prepare collection of good practices and factors of success regarding change achieved at outcome level with case study examples of community-based interventions that have had good results on the local and/or national FoRB situation.

3. **Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) and knowledge management:** Prepare collection of effective practices and areas for growth regarding MEL as well as knowledge management practices contributing to a fruitful assessment of impact.

This report is the first of two deliverables as part of the learning review process. The second is a Localized Indicators Tool rooted in the lived experiences of local actors and communities. The tool will be used to gather localized "everyday indicators" of FoRB based on participatory exercises and derived from the perceived realities of local actors to reflect measurable change in advancing FoRB at the local level. The tool and related indicators can be used to guide practitioners to develop locally defined indicators for their FoRB programs and use them to align approaches for measuring change in monitoring and evaluation of FoRB projects to the local realities of communities.

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1 NORFORB is a network of 14 ecumenical, church, or church-related organizations from Nordic countries that work with FoRB as a human right for all.

2 The Danish and Norwegian member organizations and other civil society organizations are in this report called "grant holders," whereas the term "partners" more broadly refers to both the grant holders and the local partners they worked with in the projects.

3. Methodological Approach

This learning review adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques to comprehensively assess the outcomes, good practices, and challenges of the CKU and Digni FoRB project portfolios (2020–2025). The methodology is designed to ensure rigor, inclusivity, and contextual relevance while maintaining cost-efficiency. The scope of the learning review was focused on an analysis of the collective portfolio of both CKU and Digni, without specific individualized country of funder analysis.
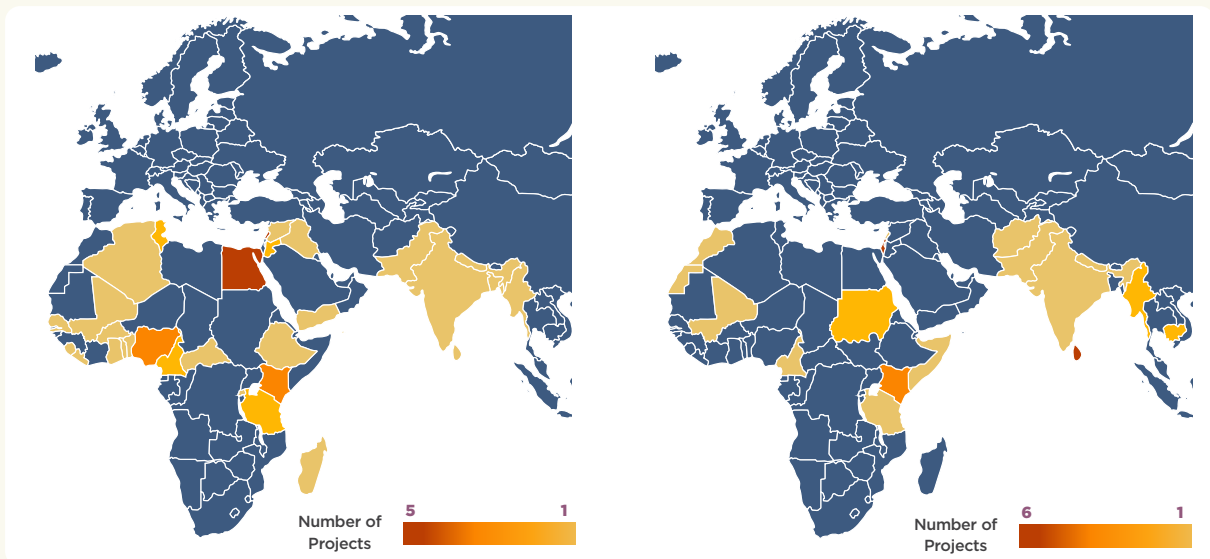
Chart 1: Coverage of Regional Projects (left) and Country Projects (right)

3.1. TARGETING

Project Targeting: The information from the desk review of all CKU and Digni projects (42 projects across 37 countries)[3] informed the selection of the 8 focus countries and 3 regional projects for the continued data collection (see next section). The selection aimed to prioritize countries that would result in the most fruitful data collection and represent the range of programs supported by CKU and Digni, both in terms of diversity of location and thematic area of work. Therefore, the criteria used for the selection included:

1. Inclusion of multiple phases of projects

2. Inclusion of regional and country-specific projects

3. Balance between CKU and Digni projects

4. Balance between projects from different geographic regions

5. Diversity of themes and types of projects and partners

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3 Country specific and regional projects engage in the following 37 countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Morocco, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, and Yemen.

Of these 8 focus countries and 3 regional projects, the 2 selected in consultation with CKU and Digni for in-person data collection were Kenya and Sri Lanka. These two countries, along with Palestine/Israel, are the countries with a significantly higher number of projects than others, with 6 projects in Sri Lanka and Palestine/Israel and 4 in Kenya. The other countries in the portfolio all have 1 or 2 projects. It was not possible to select Palestine/Israel due to the budget limitations and high travel costs and security concerns. Therefore, Sri Lanka and Kenya were selected for in-person data collection.

Stakeholder Targeting: Since the focus of this learning review is on capturing learning and identifying good practices, the data collection targeted program implementers, including representatives from the CKU and Digni grant holders and the local partners who jointly implemented each of the projects in the review. As opposed to an evaluation, which would aim to assess the results of the program and therefore would require a focus on the perspectives of participants and target communities, this review aims to capture learning from FoRB projects across a diverse portfolio. These implementers were targeted because they have the most in-depth knowledge of the projects' strategies, approaches, challenges, and learning. They were able to share insight on the decision making behind the selection of effective strategies and approaches, the challenges they faced across diverse contexts, and what they learned in the process of designing, adapting, and implementing FoRB projects.

3.2. DATA COLLECTION

To ensure triangulation of findings, data was collected through four tools:

1. Desk Review: A comprehensive review of **key documents for all 42 FoRB projects** (29 CKU projects and 13 Digni projects) implemented from 2020 to March 2025, including ongoing projects. The review was conducted March to April 2025 and focused on the following documents available at that time for each project:

• Project Proposals / Applications

• MEL Plans

• Progress / Annual Reports Monitoring Reports

• Midterm and Final Evaluation Reports

• Final Reports
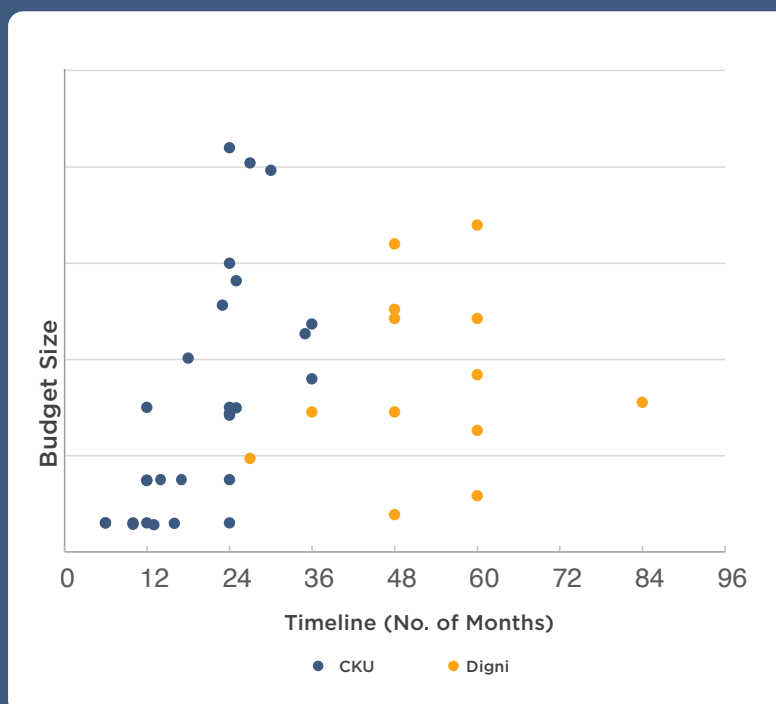
Chart 2: Project Size and Timeline

While the projects reviewed vary in scope, scale, and methodology, they collectively provide a rich basis for reflection on how FoRB principles are being translated into practice in complex, sensitive, and often restrictive environments. The review does not seek to evaluate individual project performance but rather to surface shared insights and questions that merit further exploration during the field data collection and stakeholder consultations.

This information was used to analyze the overall scope of the portfolio's programming, including thematic areas, target groups, and program strategies. The review included an initial analysis and collection of outcomes, lessons learned, good practices, and challenges reported in these documents. It captured the mapping of common outcomes across the portfolio that served as the basis for the outcome harvesting. It also included a thematic analysis to categorize interventions by thematic area and strategies applied. The desk review results informed all the data collection tools listed here to focus the line of questioning in the subsequent data collection, as well as the learning questions to frame the focus of the analysis and findings presented throughout this report.

Learning Questions guiding the review process:

- **What kinds of change have FoRB projects contributed to – attitudinal, relational, behavioral, or structural?** Which changes are most meaningful, and how can they be verified or strengthened?

- **What strategies and approaches have proven most effective in promoting FoRB, and what risks or trade-offs have emerged in their implementation?** In what contexts have these approaches been most or least successful, and why?

- **How have local actors contributed to shaping and sustaining FoRB outcomes, and what types of support have been most effective in enabling their leadership?** What barriers still limit local ownership and what can be done to address them?

- **How have projects balanced FoRB with other priorities – such as gender equality, civic engagement, peacebuilding, etc. – and what lessons emerge from these intersectional approaches?** What tensions or complementarities were observed in practice?

- **What recurring implementation challenges have projects faced, and how have they adapted in response?** What adaptation strategies worked, and which required further attention?

- **What MEL and knowledge management practices have been effective in FoRB projects?** Which tools, processes, or habits supported adaptation, reflection, and evidence use — and where are gaps or limitations still evident?

While the core of the review is based on internal project documentation, relevant external resources were consulted throughout the fieldwork and synthesis stages. The purpose is to further examine and validate emerging insights, contextualize promising practices, and inform indicator development. For example, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur's report on FoRB indicators was a reference for shaping and localizing MEL tools. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) publications on advancing religious tolerance and its intersections with FoRB was used to validate the benefits and limitations of linking FoRB to broader social agendas. In addition, learning from major initiatives such as the USAID-funded Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom award and Dutch-funded Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action informed both methodological choices and analysis of practice-based lessons. The review also considered relevant learning syntheses and project reviews conducted by European partners, where similar themes, methodologies, or implementation challenges are addressed. For instance, the previous analysis of Denmark's development cooperation efforts in promoting FoRB and protecting religious minorities or resources from the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) were consulted, including their work on integrating FoRB into development and humanitarian programs.

2. Online Survey: A survey of about 20 qualitative and quantitative questions on project effectiveness, good practices, MEL, and localization of FoRB impact measurements was circulated using Google Forms in English and French to all implementing partner focal points (50 individuals) of all projects included in the review. While partners were encouraged to share the survey with other program and MEL staff from their organizations and key project stakeholders, there is no evidence that this snowballing of the survey took place. Responses were collected from June to July 2025. The target of 50% response rate was still exceeded with **41 survey responses** (82% response rate).

Gender

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Role

- CKU/Digni Member and/or Project Grant Holder program staff
- Local implementing partner program staff
- Monitoring and evaluation (MERL / M&E / MEAL) staff
- Other project stakeholder (religious leader, civil society leader, community leader, etc.)
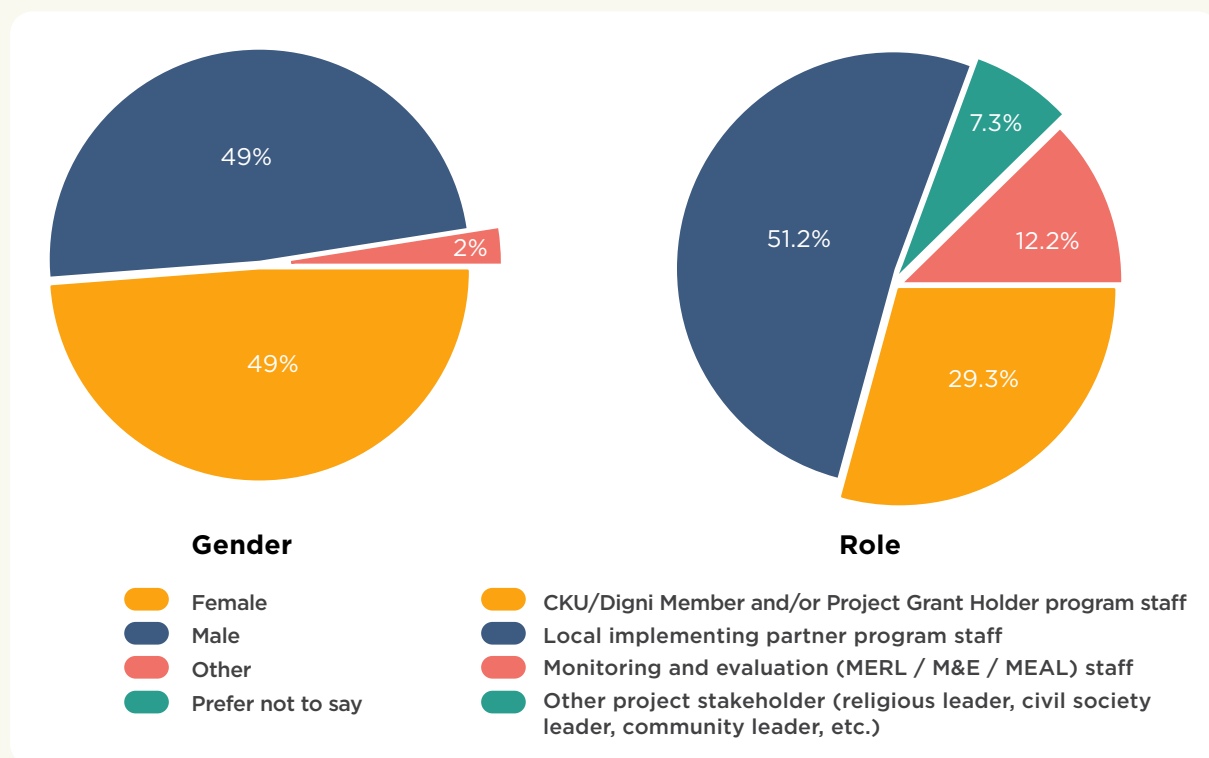
Chart 3: Survey Demographics

3. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): The research team conducted **31 semi-structured individual interviews from May to July 2025** based on a 20-question interview guide. The KIIs aimed to provide in-depth qualitative insights from project implementers on project results and identifying good practices. The targeted KIIs were all conducted with focal points from each of the projects in the targeted countries and regional projects. This included one with the CKU and Digni grant holders and one with each of the local partners of these targeted projects. The KIIs were conducted by the research team primarily online with select in-person interviews during field visits to Sri Lanka and Kenya.

4. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): As a follow up to the KIIs, the research team organized **two FGDs in August 2025**. One was with 12 MEL focal points across the targeted countries and regional projects to capture additional information on the MEL and knowledge management practices that have been effective in the FoRB projects. The questionnaire for this FGD was developed based on the results of the KIIs to focus on filling gaps in information on MEL practices and challenges. The second was with 7 CKU and Digni FoRB portfolio managers to gather more information on the overall funding structure and format and gather insights on the partnership and implementation approaches. This provided key information to ensure the recommendations of the report are feasible within CKU and Digni's FoRB portfolio funding frameworks.

3.3. OUTCOME HARVESTING

Outcome Harvesting was applied as the central analytical framework to assess changes resulting from FoRB interventions. Given the scale of the portfolio and limited resources for detailed case-by-case analysis, clustering of outcomes was applied. Reported results, derived from the available project progress and completion reports and country project evaluations, were aggregated into thematic clusters to allow systematic comparison and to highlight recurring patterns across projects. This approach was chosen deliberately to capture both intended and unintended results, offering a more organic understanding of how interventions contribute to social transformation within dynamic environments. This makes it especially suitable for FoRB programming where religious dynamics, political contexts, and community relationships continuously evolve. The process used included:

1 The analysis began with a desk review of project documentation, during which reported outcomes were reviewed and listed and were systematized into eight thematic clusters. These clusters provided the foundation for further exploration of outcomes.

2 Building on this cluster analysis, draft outcome statements were developed to capture shifts in knowledge, attitudes (individual change), behaviors (cultural change), relationships (relational change), and structures (structural change), which are central to the social change projects such as FORB. These statements were then tested and enriched during interviews and survey data collection, which allowed stakeholders to validate, nuance, or challenge the preliminary findings.

3 Each outcome was elaborated through the four dimensions central to outcome harvesting: who changed, what changed, when and where, and how project actions contributed. This structured description ensured that outcomes were not only categorized thematically but also contextualized and linked to concrete actors and processes.

This methodology combines participatory engagement with evidence-based analysis to enhance understanding of FoRB project impacts and inform future programming decisions. The approach balances structured analysis with contextual sensitivity, ensuring findings are both credible and relevant for diverse stakeholders. The process of outcome harvesting started with the literature review and culminated with the triangulation of the outcome statements among project stakeholders and finalizing them through a thorough interpretative analysis

3.4. DATA VALIDATION AND SYNTHESIS

The study employs a rigorous data synthesis and validation process to ensure findings are credible, actionable, and grounded in stakeholder perspectives. This comprehensive phase integrates multiple analytical approaches to examine data from all collection methods systematically. The analysis presented is based on triangulation between the data collected in the desk review, survey, and KIIs and FGD. This process identifies both points of convergence (where multiple sources corroborate findings) and divergence (where differing perspectives require deeper analysis), strengthening the validity and reliability of conclusions.

To validate the findings, an initial presentation of the findings was shared with CKU, Digni, and the Advisory Panel to review and validate key findings, inform development of actionable recommendations, and align strategic focus of the report. Furthermore, case studies included in the report are validated with the relevant partner organizations to ensure accuracy and secure their consent for inclusion in the report. This validation approach ensures all conclusions are thoroughly vetted, contextually relevant, and immediately applicable to strengthen future FoRB initiatives. The process maintains fidelity to the evidence while incorporating frontline practitioner insights.

3.5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adheres to ethical principles, including informed consent for all KIIs and FGDs and confidentiality in handling sensitive FoRB-related data. A key ethical consideration in data collection for FoRB projects is ensuring that participants fully understand the purpose of the learning review, how their data will be collected, stored, and used, and their right to withdraw at any time without fear of repercussions. The research team reviewed these components with each participant to ensure the level of information shared and how it is referenced in the report respects their concerns and any sensitivities.

Transparency in the review process, including clarity around data collection methods and procedures, is vital to build trust with participants and stakeholders. Ethical and responsible use of data is critical to prevent harm or misuse of findings, particularly in ways that could negatively impact individuals or their communities. Safeguarding the anonymity and confidentiality of participants is paramount, with secure data handling protocols in place. We reviewed these concerns in depth as a research team and aimed to ensure sensitivity to cultural, religious, and gender differences, avoiding actions that may cause undue stress or harm to participants, particular people from marginalized religious identity.

The research followed strict ethical principles of consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity, ensuring participants' safety, trust, and respect throughout the study.

3.6. LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

✔ **Budget constraints:** Due to the budget limitations, the number of KIIs and FGDs was limited and therefore informed the focus on the perspectives of the project implementers with limited space for input from project participants and no input from wider communities and stakeholders. Furthermore, only two in-person visits for data collection were possible. While online data collection can sometimes result in less open discussions and limit the information captured, this was not an issue for the KIIs, all participants were in fact very open and shared in-depth responses to the questions.

✔ **Diversity of perspectives and timing of data collection:** While we aimed to ensure a balance of perspectives, including types of organizations, location, and gender, given the scope of the learning review and the focus on stakeholders most knowledgeable about the projects in the portfolio, there were limitations in capturing the full diversity of perspective engaged in the portfolio's programs. Particularly since the data collection was done during the summer months some people were on leave and unavailable, requiring additional time for the data collection or in some cases we had to replace or adjust targeted respondents to meet the target.

✔ **Lack of visibility on survey reach:** Since the research team relied on partners to share the survey beyond the initial contact list provided by CKU and Digni, there is no visibility on how many people they shared it with. The limited number of responses indicates that this approach was not effective, and the survey did not reach people outside the immediate contact list of implementers. While the survey responses received were very comprehensive, if a wider sample of respondents is anticipated for future research, it may be more effective if CKU, Digni, and partners prepare a list of targeted respondents in advance to ensure the survey is directly sent to a wider list of anticipated respondents rather than relying on each partner sharing out the survey.

✔ **Implementer bias:** Due to the focus of the review on capturing learning and good practices, as well as the limited time and wide geographic scope of the learning review, the data collection is primarily focused on program implementers (grant holders and local partners) who have the most in-depth knowledge of the projects. This may result in the final report including a perspective that has "implementer bias" that is skewed towards more positive reflections on the programs, given the implementers' tendency to reflect in favor of their work. The survey did not seem to reach other project stakeholders and the KIIs targeted implementing partners, so the information captured primarily reflects the perspective of the partners. As much as possible the research team aimed to check for biases in the data triangulation process and adjust analysis throughout the report accordingly.

✔ **Various stages of implementation:** The broad timeline of the projects under review presents two key limitations. On one hand, implementers from projects that ended several years ago were not always available or the key focal points from those organizations had changed and those in the position currently had less information and institutional memory available to share learning from those projects. On the other hand, some projects are in the early stages of implementation or have faced challenges that delayed the initial implementation, so they only had emerging or intermediate learnings at the time of data collection.

4. Key Programmatic Themes and Framework

Across the portfolio, several core thematic areas emerged with consistent prominence, reflecting both the shared priorities of partners and the contextual realities in which the projects operate. This section synthesizes the thematic priorities, strategic choices, and practical approaches that have emerged across the diverse portfolio of projects reviewed. While each intervention responded to its specific context, there is a notable convergence around a set of shared focus areas and methodologies.

Promotion of FoRB literacy. FoRB was applied not simply as a legal concept, but as a lived value linked to dignity, justice, and coexistence. Projects in all regions engaged with the challenge of making FoRB understandable and relevant within local cultural and religious frameworks, often integrating it into broader educational, theological, or civic discussions.
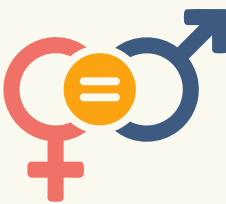
Gender equality and women's rights. While not always addressed as standalone components, gender considerations were often embedded within broader programmatic goals. Initiatives in Africa and MENA, in particular, highlighted the importance of engaging religious leaders around women's right to participate fully in community life, as well as the need for safe, peer-led spaces for women to share personal experiences, including those involving forced marriage, domestic violence, or exclusion from spiritual leadership.

Fostering social cohesion and peaceful coexistence in communities marked by religious, ethnic, or political fragmentation. Whether through interfaith dialogues, child-led integration clubs, or multimedia programming, projects sought to create spaces for mutual recognition and trust-building across differences. This work often intersected with efforts to counter religious discrimination and violence, with some projects actively responding to incidents of communal tension or hate-based attacks.

Countering religious discrimination and violence in polarized or post-conflict settings. These initiatives sought to mitigate the effects of religious hate speech, targeted violence, or exclusion from public life. In several cases, project teams responded directly to escalating tensions, either through rapid community-based outreach or in partnership with national authorities. In some projects, faith leaders collaborated across sectarian lines to prevent retaliatory violence following political unrest; in others, they contributed to challenging and transforming cultural narratives that condone or justify violence.

Youth and children engage in rights-based dialogue.
Many projects created space for children and young
people to engage with topics like inclusion, diversity, and
mutual respect. This included storytelling activities, media
programs, and youth-led discussions that helped participants
build confidence and express their views. While most of
these activities were guided by adults, they gave younger
participants an active role and often challenged prevailing
norms around age and authority.

Faith-based leadership development. Religious and
community leaders played a key role in many projects, both
as participants and as drivers of change. Some were engaged
through capacity building training and dialogue sessions,
while others led local outreach or mentoring efforts. In several
contexts, religious figures helped shift community attitudes
toward inclusion, gender equality, and peaceful coexistence.
The leaders often served as bridges between formal rights
frameworks and lived community values, making FoRB
messages more acceptable and relatable.

Civic engagement and democratic participation. Several
projects worked to strengthen the capacity of individuals and
communities to engage in civic life and influence decision-
making processes. While direct political participation was
often limited due to restrictive environments, projects found
meaningful ways to connect FoRB with local governance,
accountability, and community leadership. These initiatives
often began with facilitated dialogue but evolved into more
structured platforms for civic voice and collective problem-
solving.

While thematic areas such as gender, social cohesion, and youth engagement may appear to reflect broader development concerns, each was explicitly approached through a FoRB lens. Projects integrated FoRB not only as a legal right but as a lived principle that intersects with other rights and social issues. This intersectional framing of FoRB allowed projects to connect with diverse audiences and address barriers related to identity and inclusion. Across these thematic areas and wide range of locations, target groups, and approaches and strategies, the projects shared a common framework that included:

1. **All programs operate in restrictive environments:** Increasing restrictions, surveillance, and administrative barriers challenge FoRB. Partners adapted by shifting language, building protective networks, and engaging less controversial entry points - focusing more on grassroots, individual and community level change. These challenges were documented in project reports as they impacted implementation timelines and by partners when reflecting on programmatic challenges in the interviews, the majority identified restrictions in the contexts they work in.

2. **High levels of trust between local partners and grant holders:** Programs reflected the benefits of strong relationships and trust between partnering organizations. Many successful practices shared by partners in the interviews were a result of this trust and relationship, not robust formal processes or structures. Though most projects worked with these trusted partners, this presented a challenge for grant holders when working with new partners or emerging groups, who lack those established relationships with the grant holders.

3. **Religious leaders and faith-based organizations' legitimacy:** Religious leaders once engaged act as trusted facilitators in FoRB discussions, opening doors to communities and authorities. Their legitimacy ensures buy-in and protection for these sensitive initiatives and several partners highlighted this in the survey and interviews. However, it was observed that this can indirectly result in challenges or limitations in engaging with multi-faith implementers and non-believers.

4. **Project-based approach:** Although part of a shared funding stream, the projects are primarily implemented in silos. There was limited evidence of exchange and coordination between programs. In particular, local partners are not connected between projects and across countries or regions, lacking the potential for cross-country learning and exchange of effective approaches.

5. **Personal impact on implementers:** Not only did the projects achieve great change in their target communities, but all implementers also reflected on the positive impact working on these FoRB programs had on deepening their personal understanding of FoRB and the importance of FoRB in their work. All survey respondents reported that the projects enhanced their knowledge to some extent, with 71% selecting "very much."

5. FoRB Portfolio Outcomes

In both the survey results and KIIs implementers emphasized the high level of impact the projects had at the individual and local community level. Almost all survey respondents believe their projects contributed to improving religious equality and respect for FoRB with 73% of respondents (32% very much, 41% moderately) believing their project contributed to improving religious equality and respect for FoRB (Chart 4). A higher percentage said "moderately" because they recognize the challenges in this work: *"It is work in progress and requires a long-term effort. But things are moving in the right direction"* and *"the project period was too short to give a long-lasting impact."*

Photo by Riccardo Mayer / Shutterstock.com

We have seen great development from the opening of the FoRB-window until today. The project designs and reports bear witness to partners who are much more aware of FoRB in their context, and who are much better positioned to address the challenges.

- Survey Respondent

To what extent has the project contributed to improving religious equality and respect for FoRB in the project's context?
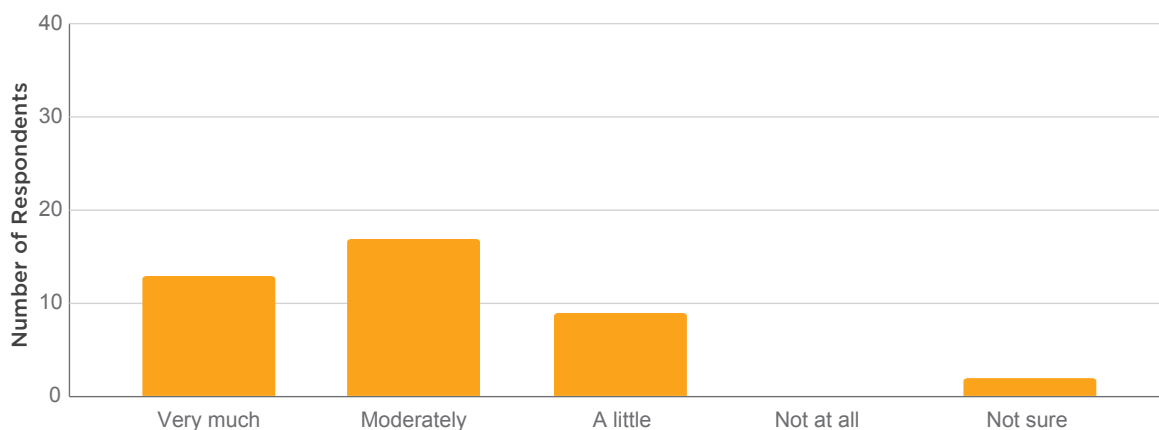
Chart 4: Survey Results Measuring Project Change

In terms of the type of change achieved, the majority of survey respondents **(85%) believed that their projects resulted in changes in attitudes and beliefs related to FoRB and religious equality and more than half (66%) also believed it resulted in changes in behaviors or practices** (Chart 5). Only one respondent said "Other" and elaborated that the project increased critical thinking skills, another individual-level change, *"The*

project provokes the traditional belief system and institutions related to it, which gives people a better chance to think for themselves and be critical." When reflecting change in behavior and attitudes respondents highlighted the change achieved in respect to religious minorities, *"We were able through this project to enhance and develop the role of minority groups to be more effective and influential in the larger society."*

What kind of changes related to FORB and religious equality have you noticed the most?
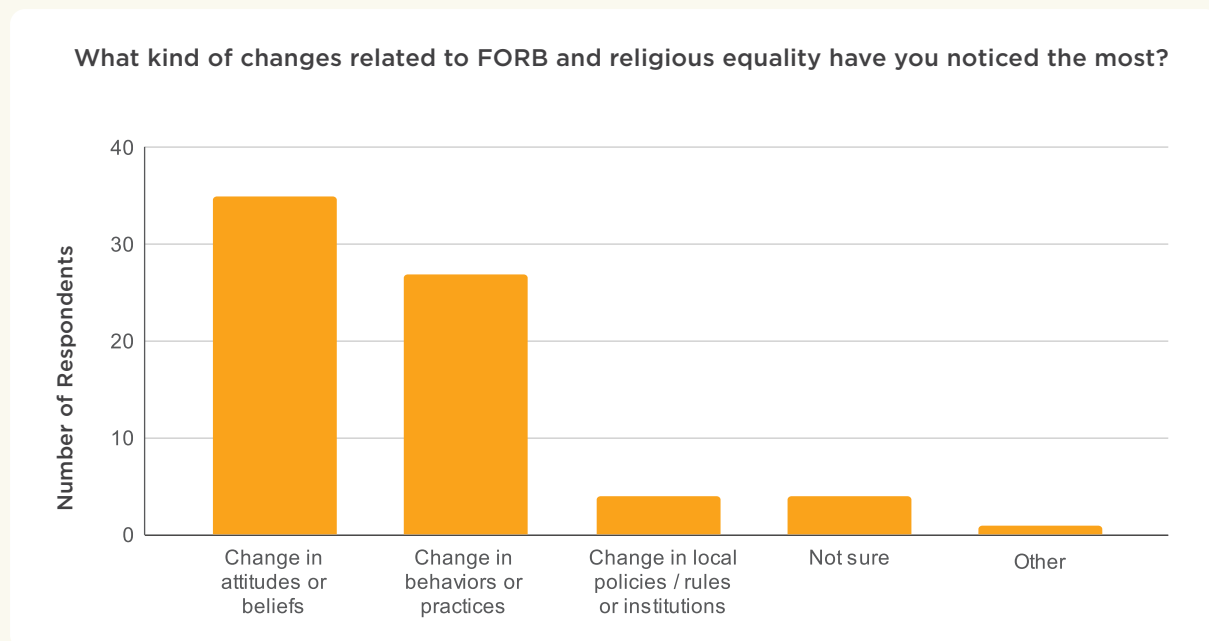
Chart 5: Survey Results on Type of Change Achieved

> The project has contributed significantly to improving respect for freedom of religion—especially in places where the voices of ethnic minorities and local communities have long been ignored or marginalized. Before this project, many Indigenous and minority faith communities experienced exclusion, discrimination, and fear when trying to express their beliefs publicly or take part in interfaith or community dialogues. There was often a sense that their perspectives didn't matter, or worse, that they could face consequences for speaking up.

- Survey Respondent

10% of survey respondents reported changes in local policies, rules, or institutions. Implementers shared many challenges in relation to achieving change at an institutional or structural level as many are working in highly complex contexts where FoRB work is highly sensitive, and therefore engaging policy makers and formal power holders can endanger partners, their teams, and the communities they work with. In most cases the lack of change at this level was anticipated from the project design, with implementers focusing on change in individual or community attitudes, behaviors, and practices as these were found to be feasible entry points.

As one survey respondent shared, "Not surprisingly the most difficult thing to address for our grant holders is legal restrictions. There is a tendency to start with attitudes with a hope of one day being able to influence legal policies." Projects that had multiple phases, and therefore longer timelines, worked towards identifying potential avenues for these structural changes and shared insights into how they could be achieved for different outcome areas in the future.

Local faith leaders are now inviting each other to events, and youth from different backgrounds are building friendships that cross religious lines. People are standing up for one another's right to believe differently, not just in words, but through real actions.

- Survey Respondent

Photo by Rupinder Singh / Unsplash.com

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5.1. OUTCOME CLUSTERS

The first research question aimed to determine the types of changes demonstrated by the projects, at attitudinal, relational, behavioral and structural levels. It was also important to understand which of these changes were perceived as the most significant by the participants and partners. As described in the methodology section, outcomes were clustered into eight categories and further analyzed through an Outcome Harvesting lens. Building on this framework, the following section presents the types of change identified – attitudinal, relational, behavioral, and structural – illustrated with evidence from documentation, interviews, and survey data.

Cluster 1:   Changing perceptions of FoRB through contextual framing

Generalized Outcome Statement	Religious leaders, civil society actors, and community members came to both understand and accept FoRB not as a foreign agenda, but as a principle rooted in faith, values, and traditional norms. By drawing on lived experiences and embedding FoRB in narratives of dignity, compassion, justice, and coexistence, projects reduced resistance and enabled more open dialogue.
Key thematic area	Promotion of FoRB literacy
Types of change	*Attitudinal*: Perceptions shifted toward seeing FoRB as legitimate and aligned with individual faith.
	Relational: More constructive dialogue between faith actors, civil society, and communities.
	Behavioral (emerging): Openness to join FoRB discussions once reframed.
Frequency in portfolio	High - common, portfolio-wide pattern, with roughly 60-80% of projects contributing to this outcome

In many project settings, both governments and communities viewed human rights and FoRB as externally imposed, 'Western' constructs. Some projects' participants and religious leaders feared that supporting FoRB implied abandoning core convictions, such as traditional positions toward atheists or sexual and gender minorities. Even the term 'minorities' was criticized, perceived as divisive or as granting undue privilege to certain groups. Such associations created significant barriers to discussing FoRB openly and safely.

For instance, one partner's experience highlighted how initial perceptions of FoRB as a 'Western concept' eroding 'African values' were gradually shifted. This was achieved by moving beyond direct 'human rights' terminology, which sometimes triggered resistance due to its perceived fluidity or threat to religious teachings. Instead, a more relatable approach was adopted, leveraging local cultural practices, idioms, and proverbs that promote the sacredness of life and community living, such as the concept of 'ubuntu' This method allowed for the communication of FoRB principles in a way that resonated deeply with the local

populace, regardless of their religious affiliation, by connecting it to existing, widely accepted communal values.

To counter this resistance, projects consistently adopted inclusive and culturally resonant framing. Instead of emphasizing 'freedoms' and 'minority rights,' they spoke of 'all communities', 'living together,' or 'social harmony.' Instead of abstract rights language, they highlighted values deeply embedded in religious and cultural traditions, such as dignity, compassion, justice, coexistence, and authentic faith practice. Projects also emphasized lived experience – encouraging participants to reflect on FoRB through personal stories, community practices, and familiar traditions. In some contexts, contested categories like 'minorities' were replaced by broader ones, such as women, youth, or migrants, which carried less political baggage and fostered broader acceptance.

This reframing enabled more open dialogue and reduced resistance across diverse audiences. Religious leaders, civil society actors, and community members began to accept FoRB not as an external imposition but as a value and moral, faith-aligned principle. In places like Palestine and Cameroon, discussions shifted toward coexistence and reconciliation, while in MENA media initiatives, viewers reported that FoRB framed through scripture and values felt both authentic and relevant. Across these cases, contextual framing proved to be a powerful enabler of change: it lowered perceived threat, built trust, and created safe entry points for engaging on sensitive FoRB issues.

Cluster 2: Religious leaders initiating or modeling inclusive behaviors

Generalized Outcome Statement	Religious leaders across diverse contexts, including senior clerics, community-level faith leaders, and traditional authorities, moved from passive or resistant positions to actively modeling inclusive behaviors, by participating in interfaith visits and services, endorsing women's religious autonomy, co-developing charters and public statements on interreligious harmony, and condemning intolerance while linking FoRB to discourses of "living together." Through these actions, they signaled acceptance of FoRB as compatible with their religious values, they acted as agents of change and provided visible examples of tolerance and coexistence within their communities.
Key thematic area	Promotion of FoRB literacy Faith-based leadership development Gender equality and women's rights
Types of Change	*Attitudinal*: Leaders' personal convictions shifted toward supporting inclusion. *Relational*: Increased trust and cooperation across religious divides. *Behavioral*: Leaders took visible, public actions that modeled inclusive practices for their followers. *Structural*: In some cases, endorsement by senior leaders created new norms within institutions or communities.
Frequency across portfolio	High - common, portfolio-wide pattern, with roughly 60-80% of projects contributing to this outcome

Religious leaders hold tremendous moral authority and social legitimacy, but this influence has historically been double-edged: they can be both perpetrators and victims of FoRB violations. In many settings, they were initially skeptical, fearing FoRB could undermine their authority, encourage conversions, or contradict core doctrines. Leaders were also reluctant to engage with gender-based FoRB violations, often perceiving intersectional issues of FoRB and gender as foreign impositions. Even basic participation was complicated in certain contexts, where their engagement required government approval. Such barriers meant leaders often began as inhibiting factors rather than allies in FoRB work. On the other hand, religious leaders are highly influential figures within their communities and can significantly impact the perceptions and behaviors of their followers. By understanding FoRB, they can address misconceptions around FORB and counter harmful cultural or traditional practices.

Projects created spaces where leaders could experience interfaith and inclusive practices directly, often through capacity-building sessions, dialogue exchanges, and symbolic acts such as visiting other faiths' places of worship. Early engagement of faith institutions and consultation with religious leaders transformed leaders from potential opponents into enablers of FoRB work. Capacity building, often through Training of Trainers, created a multiplier effect where trained leaders cascaded knowledge into their own communities. Exposure visits – such as interfaith exchanges where leaders prayed together or visited each other's places of worship – helped break down stereotypes and build empathy. Co-development of charters and policy content gave leaders ownership and legitimacy. Practical collaboration, where leaders worked side by side on small community projects, reinforced the message that FoRB is compatible with religious duty and the common good.

Through these mechanisms, religious leaders gradually shifted from hesitant observers to visible champions of FoRB, modeling inclusive behaviors in ways that carried strong symbolic and practical weight. In East Africa, for instance, church and mosque leaders in Kenya began attending each other's services and festivals, with one Muslim Sheikh noting in the project documents, *"Today we do not see each other from the prism of religion. We are brothers and sisters. We slaughter together. Eat together during festivals. Pray together and mingle freely. Our Christian brothers have, and are free to, enter our worship centers, and we are also free to enter churches."* Similar dynamics unfolded in Mali, India, Sri Lanka and other countries, where inter-communal platforms enabled religious and traditional leaders to collaborate on both dialogue and collaboration. In Palestine, for the first time, Christian and Muslim leaders organized joint public events that promoted peace and reconciliation, while in Kenya leaders carried their influence into national-level advocacy, co-authoring policy recommendations through the Inter-Religious Council. Across these diverse settings, leaders also began to challenge harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation, and to reinterpret FoRB as compatible with their own religious teachings. These actions strengthened public confidence in interreligious cooperation and demonstrated that religious leadership could serve as a unifying rather than divisive social force.

Religious leaders across regions embraced FoRB as a shared value, promoting interfaith cooperation, peacebuilding, and social harmony through inclusive action and advocacy.

In several contexts, such collaboration also increased institutional recognition of FoRB as a shared social value and encouraged government engagement with faith actors in peace and coexistence efforts.

Cluster 3: Youth increase engagement in FoRB dialogue and civic life

Generalized Outcome Statement	Youth participants demonstrated increased confidence, leadership, and agency in civic engagement and FoRB-related discourse. They initiated local activities, joined regional consultations, engaged in storytelling and media platforms, and advocated for rights and inclusion. In some cases, they connected personal experiences with broader justice issues and became visible change agents in their communities.
Key thematic area	Youth engage in rights-based dialogue Civic engagement and democratic participation Fostering social cohesion and peaceful coexistence
Types of change	*Attitudinal*: Youth gained confidence and began to see themselves as capable of influencing FoRB and civic issues. *Relational*: Youth developed trust and collaboration across faith and social divides. *Behavioral*: Youth initiated and led activities, moving from passive participation to active leadership. *Structural (emerging)*: Youth voices gained recognition in formal processes and platforms, embedding their role in decision-making spaces.
Frequency across portfolio	High - common, portfolio-wide pattern, with roughly 60-80% of projects contributing to this outcome

In many countries, young people face significant limitations in their ability to participate in decision-making and in public discussions related to religion and rights. Age-based hierarchies often prioritize the voices of elders, while conservative social norms discourage youth from questioning authority or engaging openly in sensitive topics. In addition, the politicization of religious issues further restricts space for youth, as their involvement can be perceived as risky or inappropriate. As a result, young people are frequently regarded not as legitimate actors in civic and interfaith dialogue but rather as vulnerable groups in need of protection, which reinforces their exclusion from meaningful participation.

Projects deliberately created safe, enabling spaces where youth could connect their lived experiences with broader discourses of justice, dignity, and coexistence. Mechanisms varied by region. In Africa, Training of Trainers and cascading models positioned youth not only as participants but as facilitators of FoRB activities, entrusting them with replication in their own communities. In Sri Lanka projects supported peer clubs where children learned second languages, staged joint activities, and reframed their identities through creative tools like the "Superhero" methodology, thereby normalizing interethnic and interfaith contact from an early age. In Palestine, reconciliation encounters gave youth a platform to link personal

stories of loss and discrimination with FoRB and justice, culminating in initiatives such as health projects or emblematic campaigns. In MENA, media and storytelling engaged youth, including "local reporter" training that empowered children to interview religious leaders, positioning them as curious inquirers rather than passive followers. Across all these contexts, visibility was key: youth were given roles in consultations, media platforms, and community forums, shifting perceptions of their legitimacy.

These interventions generated visible outcomes. Attitudinally, youth grew in confidence and began to see themselves as capable of shaping FoRB and civic agendas. Relationally, they built bridges across divides, whether between Christians and Muslims in Palestine, Sinhalese and Tamil communities in Sri Lanka, or Christians and Muslims in Kenya's border areas. Behaviorally, they initiated their own activities – running interfaith clubs, leading storytelling circles, or creating joint savings groups – marking a transition from passive participation to proactive leadership. Structurally, in some contexts their voices entered formal fora, such as national interreligious councils in Kenya, signaling an early but important shift toward institutional recognition of youth in FoRB dialogue.

Cluster 4: Women increase agency and participation in FoRB dialogue and leadership

Generalized Outcome Statement	Women began to actively engage in FoRB-related discussions and were increasingly accepted as leaders and facilitators in traditionally male-dominated spaces. Peer groups and storytelling sessions provided women with safe spaces to share personal struggles, such as domestic violence and religious exclusion, while community and faith leaders began acknowledging these concerns as legitimate and faith compatible. In some conservative areas, women's leadership was explicitly endorsed by male leaders.
Key thematic area	Promotion of FoRB literacy Gender equality and women's rights Civic engagement and democratic participation
Types of change	*Attitudinal*: Growing acceptance of women's rights and personal autonomy and a decline in stigmatization; and enhanced confidence among women to articulate their perspectives. *Relational*: There are more inclusive family dialogues and stronger peer and interfaith networks. *Behavioral*: Women increasingly engaged in support structures, sought professional assistance, and practiced subtle acts of resistance to restrictive norms. Increasing usage of gender-inclusive language in religious and social spaces. *Structural (emerging)*: Greater women's representation in leadership and legal debates, underpinned by intentional inclusion mechanisms and shifts in institutional terminology.[4]
Frequency across portfolio	Moderate - recurrent but context-specific, with roughly 30-60% of projects contributing to this outcome

4 For example, the usage of the term "al-qada diniyin" (religious leaders, inclusive of men and women) in the formal vocabulary and discourse of institutions (religious, legal, or social) signals and reinforces a structural shift toward inclusivity.

In many project settings, women experienced a double layer of discrimination: as members of faith or belief minorities, and as women in patriarchal social and religious environments. Their participation in FoRB dialogue was often constrained by entrenched gender roles, religious interpretations that limit women's public voice, and the sensitivity of terms like gender itself. Women who took on FoRB-related advocacy frequently faced online harassment and disproportionate attacks compared to male counterparts (Sri Lanka). Even where women were formally represented, their inclusion could be tokenistic – they were present at meetings without real decision-making power (Cameroon). In conservative contexts, participation also depended on approval from male religious leaders, and in some countries (Morocco, Palestine) religious and cultural norms placed women under especially strict expectations in public roles.

Projects addressed these barriers through two complementary strategies. On one hand, they built women's own capacity and confidence through safe spaces, peer groups, and storytelling clubs where women could share lived experiences of discrimination (Sri Lanka, MENA). Training of Trainers and cascading capacity-building strengthened women's confidence to take leadership and replicate learning in their own communities (Kenya, Tanzania). On the other hand, projects engaged wider circles of influence to shift norms. Religious leaders were encouraged to endorse women's roles publicly, providing legitimacy that reduced backlash; men and male leaders were included to promote positive masculinities (Kenya), while religious leaders were trained to reinterpret teachings in ways that legitimized women's participation (MENA, Palestine, Morocco). Some projects innovated by using Islamic feminist knowledge to challenge restrictive norms at policy and jurisprudence levels

(Morocco). Practical cooperation in mixed groups (Kenya, Mali, Sudan) normalized women's presence in interfaith and civic dialogue. Media approaches (MENA) created both visibility and protective distance, enabling women to engage FoRB issues without immediate local backlash. These combined strategies increased the legitimacy of women's participation in religious and civic spheres but also generated gradual normative change - making gender equality a locally rooted, faith-compatible concept rather than a foreign agenda. As a result, women's voices began influencing both public discourse and institutional decision-making spaces with greater confidence and acceptance.

As a result, women not only entered FoRB spaces but also shaped them. In Kenya and Tanzania, FoRB champions and village community bank groups built sustainable platforms that merged economic solidarity with dialogue on religious freedom, strengthening women's credibility as community leaders. In Sri Lanka, mothers engaged in peer groups gained self-confidence, while youth clubs under women's leadership began to be taken seriously by local communities. In Palestine, all-female interfaith cohorts completed reconciliation processes that

positioned women as interreligious leaders. In the MENA region, safe digital spaces, such as an online group of 7,000 members, allowed women to express themselves openly, while parallel engagement of men reduced resistance within households. In Morocco, the application of Islamic feminist interpretations expanded FoRB and women's rights discourses into legal and theological arenas, creating entry points to decision-making spaces. Meanwhile, across Sub-Saharan Africa, women took part in interfaith advocacy, challenged harmful practices, and in several cases gained explicit endorsements from male religious leaders, signaling a gradual shift in institutional norms.

Cluster 5: Public discourse and media narratives shift toward inclusion and minority rights

Generalized Outcome Statement	Public discourse around FoRB, inclusion, and minority rights shifted using professional media platforms and grassroots communication tools. High-quality productions on satellite television, digital platforms, and publications normalized sensitive conversations, while grassroots initiatives such as podcasts, community radio, and digital storytelling localized FoRB messages and made them relatable. Together, these approaches generated new attitudinal openness, fostered relational empathy across divides, and encouraged behavioral engagement in inclusive practices.
Key thematic area	Promotion of FoRB literacy Fostering social cohesion and peaceful coexistence
Types of change	*Attitudinal*: Viewers and listeners reported greater empathy toward marginalized groups, perceiving FoRB as compatible with their own traditions rather than as an external construct. *Relational*: Shared storytelling platforms and interfaith content created new bridges between groups, normalizing dialogue and reducing suspicion. *Behavioral*: Youth and community members began producing their own content – films, podcasts, theatre – actively shaping narratives of coexistence. Religious leaders endorsed or participated in media initiatives, lending credibility.
Frequency across portfolio	Moderate - recurrent but context-specific, with roughly 30-60% of projects contributing to this outcome

In most of the regions where projects operate, discussions of FoRB and minority rights are highly sensitive and often suppressed in political or community spaces. Public discourse has been shaped by entrenched stereotypes, exclusionary narratives, and politicized use of religion. Traditional advocacy channels faced limits due to fear of backlash or censorship, making mass and digital media crucial entry points for engaging wide audiences in safer and more accessible ways. Media interventions within FoRB projects operated at two distinct but complementary levels: professional, institutional media and grassroots, project-driven communication. Together, they illustrate how public discourse on FoRB was both normalized in the mainstream sphere and made locally relevant at the community level.

Professional broadcasting initiatives, most prominently in the MENA region, used television, satellite, and digital platforms to reach millions of viewers. Through high-quality productions such as drama series, talk shows, children's educational programming, and documentaries, these initiatives created a broad social conversation around FoRB, dignity, and coexistence. Viewers were exposed to themes that had previously been silenced, and by integrating FoRB into widely consumed formats, the projects contributed to attitudinal shifts: empathy toward marginalized groups increased, the notion of peaceful coexistence became more familiar, and interreligious understanding was framed as an everyday reality rather than an exceptional aspiration. The visibility of these messages sometimes triggered backlash or censorship, highlighting that greater resonance also brings greater contestation. At the same time, these pushbacks underscored that sensitive themes were reaching audiences, forcing engagement, and demonstrating relevance.

At the grassroots level, media was reimagined as a participatory tool for dialogue and ownership. Civil society organizations, youth groups, and FoRB trainers used low-cost, flexible formats such as podcasts, newsletters, and WhatsApp groups to sustain conversations within local networks. Storytelling initiatives and community-led digital stories, allowed individuals to connect personal experiences with broader FoRB values, producing relational change by bridging divides between communities. Theatrical performances and creative workshops, often designed through training-of-trainers models, enabled participants themselves to become producers of narrative content, reinforcing behavioral change by encouraging action and dialogue in their own environments.

Taken together, these two tiers of media engagement reveal a layered pathway of change. Institutional productions shifted public discourse at scale, embedding FoRB into the social imagination, while grassroots media localized these shifts, strengthening relationships and catalyzing community action. Changes were most visible in the narratives of empathy, coexistence, and shared identity and in using media to organize dialogues, workshops, or joint campaigns.

Photo by Diana Vucane / Shutterstock.com

From national broadcasts to local storytelling, media became a catalyst for empathy, coexistence, and interfaith understanding—transforming how FoRB is seen, shared, and lived.

Cluster 6: Interfaith collaboration and institutionalized platforms strengthen

Generalized Outcome Statement	Structured platforms, networks, and events fostered interfaith and cross-sectoral collaboration. These initiatives went beyond ad hoc dialogue to create sustainable spaces – whether local committees, regional coalitions, or online hubs –where diverse actors could cooperate on shared priorities. Through these mechanisms, interfaith collaboration became institutionalized, producing more durable forms of advocacy, conflict mitigation, and collective action for FoRB.
Key thematic area	Faith-based leadership development Fostering social cohesion and peaceful coexistence
Types of change	*Attitudinal*: Participation in local committees and regional networks helped shift perceptions, as actors began to see FoRB not as divisive but as a shared responsibility to be more willing to participate in interfaith engagement. *Relational*: Regular interaction within structured platforms built trust across faiths, genders, and institutions, reducing suspicion and fostering cooperation. *Behavioral*: Concrete collaboration – such as cleaning markets, mediating conflicts, or drafting charters – demonstrated FoRB principles in action and normalized inclusive practices. *Structural*: Institutionalized networks, forums, and charters embedded these changes into formal structures, while advocacy through mechanisms such as Universal Periodic Review (UPR) submissions and international resolutions further anchored FoRB concerns within legal and policy frameworks, ensuring continuity beyond individual projects.
Frequency across portfolio	High - common, portfolio-wide pattern, with roughly 60-80% of projects contributing to this outcome

Fragmentation among civil society actors, political restrictions on public gatherings, and mutual suspicion across religious communities limit the reach of isolated initiatives. Without structured and institutionalized spaces, cooperation risks fading once funding ends or tensions rise. Platforms, networks, and coalitions address this gap by providing continuity, legitimacy, and a common identity that participants can rally around. They allow diverse actors – from religious and traditional leaders to women, youth, and civil society groups – to pool resources, build trust over time, and coordinate responses to shared challenges. In restrictive environments, these platforms also serve as protective umbrellas: their collective voice carries more weight with authorities than individual organizations could muster alone.

Projects facilitated collaboration through different but complementary models. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the regional program developed multi-layered structures: the Sub-Saharan Africa FoRB Trainers Network, regular stakeholder forums including religious, traditional, and government leaders, and initiatives where Christians and Muslims worked side by side

on market clean-ups or local development. These practical activities made coexistence visible in everyday life. In South Asia, the regional program built a civil society forum connecting organizations from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The forum institutionalized South Asian cooperation around FoRB, producing joint advocacy, training, and solidarity across contexts where individual actors often worked in isolation. In the MENA region, the regional program invested in hybrid models: the Bihorriya Hub served as a regional knowledge and resource platform, while the FoRB Training-of-Trainer's alumni network continued learning through monthly sessions, capacity building, and mutual support. Regional conferences gathered activists, scholars, and religious leaders to transform expertise into collective agendas. A partner was engaged in structured collaboration through interfaith groups (such as Caritas and peacebuilding forums) and partnerships with grassroots organizations, educators, and psychologists.

These mechanisms generated shifts at multiple levels. Locally, interfaith committees and stakeholder forums created sustained trust and enabled cooperation on shared concerns, from addressing gender-based FoRB violations to improving market relations between landlords and tenants of different faiths. Regionally, alumni networks and coalitions ensured that learning and solidarity extended beyond individual projects, reinforcing the legitimacy of FoRB as a collective cause. Globally, regional networks, like that in South Asia, positioned grassroots actors as credible voices in international advocacy, elevating local cases of FoRB violations into transnational debates.

Cluster 7: Local ownership and sustainability of FoRB initiatives increase

Generalized Outcome Statement	Local actors – including religious and community leaders, youth, and women – increasingly took responsibility for FoRB initiatives. They were involved in setting priorities and adapting approaches, led training and dialogues, and created local structures such as committees and networks. In several cases, these actors continued activities, mobilized peers, and integrated FoRB into everyday community practices beyond direct project support.
Key thematic area	All themes (cross-cutting)
Types of change	*Attitudinal*: Communities began to view FoRB work as their own, rather than externally imposed.
	Relational: Trust in FoRB initiatives grew as local leaders and organizations facilitated processes themselves, strengthening cooperation across groups.
	Behavioral: Locally initiated activities, networks, and savings groups continued beyond project cycles, with some evidence of self-sustained advocacy and dialogue.
	Structural: In some contexts, formalized committees, multi-level trainer networks, and community-based associations became semi-institutionalized mechanisms that extended FoRB initiatives beyond project boundaries.
Frequency across portfolio	Moderate - recurrent but context-specific, with roughly 30-60% of projects contributing to this outcome

Local ownership in development and peacebuilding is more than community "participation": it refers to the extent to which local actors define priorities, make decisions, allocate and manage resources, and embed initiatives into their own social, cultural, and institutional practices. Because local responders are often the first to act in crises and the last to remain when external agencies withdraw, their contextual knowledge and cultural legitimacy are essential assets. When projects are genuinely owned and steered by local stakeholders – religious and community leaders, youth, women, or grassroots associations – they not only gain greater credibility but also a built-in capacity to adapt to evolving challenges. This embeddedness creates resilience: activities are woven into everyday structures such as schools, savings groups, or interfaith committees, rather than depending on temporary external presence. In this sense, local ownership is a direct driver of sustainability, ensuring that positive change can continue, replicate, and transform beyond the project cycle.

Across contexts, projects strengthened local ownership by ensuring that communities were not only participants but also decision-makers and implementers. Almost all initiatives involved local actors in identifying priorities, adapting project content, and shaping design from the outset. Religious and community leaders, youth, and women increasingly acted as trainers, facilitators of dialogue, and advocates, rather than external staff taking the lead. Approaches were carefully contextualized – linking FoRB principles to local values, cultural norms, and everyday practices – to make them resonate and reduce resistance. Community-driven structures such as councils, committees, and interfaith networks were established to anchor activities in local realities and provide continuity.

These mechanisms took different forms across regions. In Asia, federations of village heads (Gaonpuras) and self-help groups in India became trusted decision-making bodies, while in Sri Lanka, community-based organizations gained expertise to independently carry forward FoRB-related work. In MENA and Africa, Training of Trainers created a cadre of alumni who facilitated locally adapted workshops and produced content in local languages. Media programming in MENA engaged grassroots audiences through locally led viewer groups and offices that continued conversations beyond broadcasts. Kenya and Tanzania, interfaith forums and even WhatsApp groups run by local leaders became platforms for conflict mediation and joint advocacy. Projects also linked FoRB to practical, community-rooted activities, such as Village Savings and Loan Associations in Sudan or women's table-banking groups in Kenya, that both met economic needs and provided safe spaces for dialogue. These shared mechanisms helped shift local actors from beneficiaries to genuine co-owners and custodians of change.

A community-led approach and the consistent use of participatory methods were crucial in building trust and ensuring local buy-in, which is vital for sensitive topics like FoRB in traditional settings.

- Survey Respondent

Strengthening local ownership mechanisms generally contributed to greater agency, resilience, and prospects for sustainability. In many cases, communities came to see FoRB work less as externally driven interventions and more as their own initiatives, linked to local priorities and carried forward by trusted actors. This shift enabled religious leaders, youth, and women to take on more visible roles in dialogue, conflict mediation, and community advocacy, though the extent of their leadership varied across contexts. At the same time, sustainability has been uneven, and long-term continuity often depended on broader structural and resource factors beyond the projects' direct control.

Cluster 8: Legal empowerment and institutional engagement on FoRB

Generalized Outcome Statement	Stakeholders engaged with legal and institutional frameworks to advance FoRB. This included building relationships with duty bearers, strengthening the capacity of civil society and local authorities to navigate legal frameworks, supporting legal advocacy, and fostering collaboration through interreligious and civic platforms. In some contexts, this resulted in access to schools and public spaces, recognition of interfaith committees, or policy recommendations. In others, engagement with international mechanisms and diplomatic channels produced concrete outcomes.
Key thematic area	Promotion of FoRB literacy Countering religious discrimination and violence
Types of change	*Attitudinal*: Duty bearers and officials in some contexts showed increased awareness of FoRB and willingness to collaborate. *Relational*: New channels of cooperation emerged between civil society, religious leaders, and government actors on FoRB issues. *Behavioral*: Concrete actions included local authorities granting access, officials joining project activities, lawyers beginning to take FoRB cases, and interreligious councils submitting policy papers. *Structural (emerging)*: In select cases, platforms and agreements gained formal or legal recognition.
Frequency across portfolio	Low - niche or specialized area, strong in a few cases, but not widespread, with less than 30% of projects contributing to this outcome

Engaging with legal and institutional frameworks around FoRB was both an opportunity and a risk. On one hand, civil society actors recognized that long-term change required cooperation with public institutions, whether through local authorities, ministries, or judicial systems. On the other hand, direct engagement often carried political sensitivities, surveillance, or backlash. Where partnerships could be built, however, they opened procedural doors for recognition, legitimacy, and more sustainable influence.

Projects advanced legal empowerment and institutional engagement by combining legal literacy with relationship-building toward duty bearers. This included training activists, lawyers, and occasionally officials on constitutional and international FoRB provisions; obtaining formal authorizations or letters from authorities (Tanzania); creating regular channels such as interfaith forums or WhatsApp groups with local officials; and forming platforms where religious, traditional, and municipal leaders jointly discussed violations and responses (Cameroon, Mali). Partners also produced legal and policy-oriented outputs, such as policy papers in Kenya, interreligious charters and white papers in MENA, and submissions to UPR or International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) in South Asia. In Morocco, engagement took place within state-sanctioned religious institutions, with guides for imams and female preachers designed to influence family law reforms. In fragile contexts, partners relied on international channels, such as UN offices and embassies in Somalia, to address individual FoRB violations.

These efforts contributed to legitimizing FoRB as a public concern and improving the procedural environment for rights protection. In Somalia, civil society engagement with the UN and diplomatic missions secured the release of three individuals detained under religiously discriminatory laws. In Sri Lanka, cooperation with the provincial Department of Education led officials to endorse FoRB-related programming in schools – an unprecedented step that validated civil society efforts. Elsewhere, local authorities granted access to public venues (Palestine), or formally recognized community platforms (Cameroon). Interreligious councils in Kenya submitted policy recommendations to the government, while regional networks raised FoRB issues in UPR and IRFBA processes. At the same time, progress remained fragile: restrictive policies, surveillance, and political resistance often slowed or reversed gains. Sustainability of these outcomes largely depended on political will, security risks, and the duration of institutional engagement.

6. Good Practices

The thematic areas identified across the portfolio were brought to life through a range of interconnected strategies, adapted to local contexts and the capacity of partners. These strategies often overlapped in practice and reinforced each other during project implementation and were supported by a set of adaptive, grounded, and often innovative implementation approaches. These approaches shaped how the work was done and helped ensure that interventions remained contextually relevant and inclusive.

The strategies and approaches identified after the desk review were further examined, validated, and refined based on the results of the survey and KIIs. Based on the collective analysis the following good practices were identified. Some of these good practices have limited application in the current portfolio (as seen in the survey results) and have the potential to be shared and replicated among partners. Others are already widely applied across partners and adapted to the specific needs of their contexts.

It must also be noted that the number of partners that identified each practice as effective does not necessarily reflect their level of effectiveness more broadly, but rather the level of effective usage within the portfolio under review. They are presented here in that order with the final two identified later during interviews with partners and therefore not included in the survey.

What program approaches and strategies have been the most effective in the project?
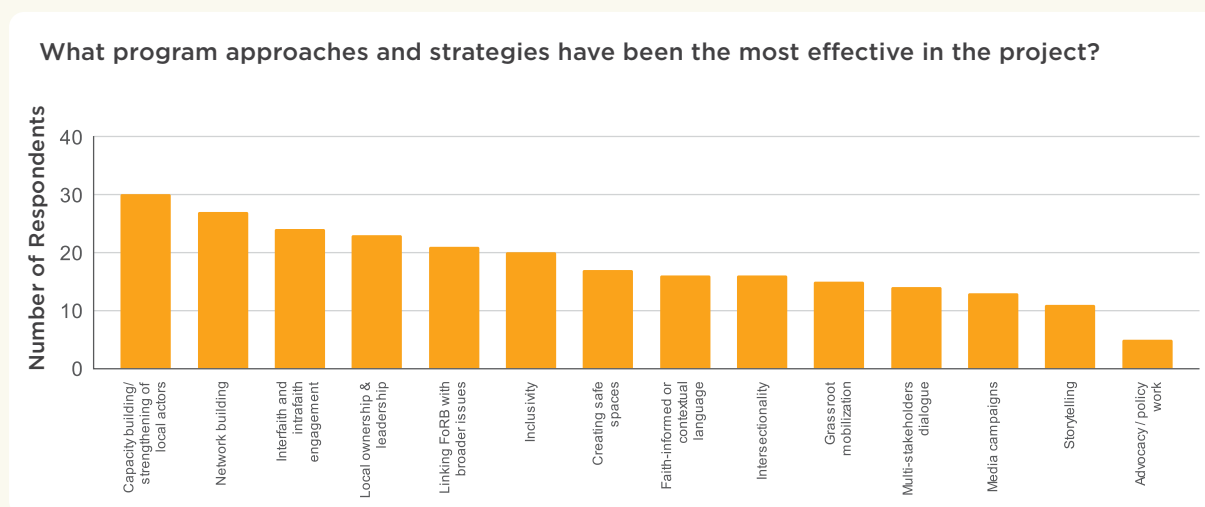
Chart 6: Survey Results on Effective Strategies and Approaches

1. **Capacity building by preparing local trainers to teach others in their own communities with ready-made toolkits that can be easily localized.**

One of the most widespread and sustainable approaches across projects was capacity building and strengthening of local actors - 73% of survey respondents reported that this strategy was effective in their work (Chart 6). Projects invested in equipping local trainers with FoRB knowledge and practical facilitation skills, enabling them to train others in their own communities. A key enabling factor was the availability of ready-made toolkits, curricula, and digital resources – such as those provided through the FoRB Learning Platform[5] – which offered structured materials, facilitation guidance,

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5 The Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Learning Platform is an initiative of NORFORB in partnership with a wide range of secular and faith-based organizations that seek to promote the human right to freedom of religion or belief for all, as given in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

and adaptable modules in multiple languages. These resources could be easily localized and integrated into community-level training, ensuring both consistency of content and contextual relevance. By multiplying trainers and providing access to standardized yet flexible learning tools, projects reached wider audiences, reduced costs, and created lasting pools of expertise. Projects tailored their training to different groups, ranging from educators and journalists to artists and activists. Sustainability depended on continuous follow-up (e.g., mentoring, refresher sessions, networks), opportunities for practice, and recognition of trainers' contributions. Incentives – financial or symbolic – helped at the start, but long-term motivation was maintained when trainers felt ownership of their work, saw visible community impact, and became part of active peer networks.

Case Study

PROCMURA, a long-standing ecumenical organization based in Nairobi with a mandate to promote peace and mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims across Africa, initiated a series of training of trainers between 2018 and 2022 to strengthen FoRB capacity in 16 countries across Africa. The approach began with Christian leaders and later expanded to include Muslim participants. Training combined conceptual modules on FoRB with practical facilitation skills, supported by toolkits and the FoRB Learning Platform's Local Changemakers Course. The latter provided structured material that could be translated and adapted, ensuring conceptual clarity while remaining accessible in local contexts.

Trained participants organized community-level dialogues, integrated FoRB literacy into local religious spaces, and documented violations more systematically. The availability of standardized resources online reduced dependence on central offices and allowed trainers to continue their work independently. These activities evolved into the Sub-Saharan Africa FoRB Trainers Network, which facilitated peer mentoring, cross-border collaboration, and the exchange of contextual practices.

The cascading model was sustained across multiple program cycles. Trainers Network (2020–2024) consolidated at a continental level, while a subsequent initiative

"Among religious leaders, who took part in our capacity-building trainings, there has been a real shift in perception – a better understanding of FoRB as human rights. That is a very significant change. From the stories they have shared, you can clearly see how their awareness has grown. They are now able to recognize FoRB violations in their own context, document them, and share them with us. At the beginning, many could not even articulate or understand that these situations were violations. This progress is a remarkable achievement."

– PROCMURA interview

(2024–2026) applied the same approach to women's empowerment, training women leaders to convene focus groups and forums. This continuity illustrates how training of trainers' structures can move from individual skill building to institutionalized regional networks.

The model is effective when accompanied by ongoing mentoring, refresher sessions, and recognition of trainers' contributions. Motivation was sustained not only through initial incentives but also through visible community impact and integration into active peer networks. Attention to quality assurance and multi-faith inclusion was necessary to maintain legitimacy and prevent dilution of FoRB concepts.

2. Network building through facilitated cross-border peer learning and exchange visits to share and adapt successful practices across countries

Projects invested in building structured FoRB networks that extended across borders and sustained collaboration beyond single project cycles, and 66% of survey respondents reported this strategy was effective (Chart 6). For example, a MENA regional training of trainers' program built an active alumni network, now in its seventh cohort, where participants continue monthly sessions and self-organized peer exchanges. By targeting diverse groups – journalists, artists, educators, and human rights defenders – the network ensures that FoRB practice is embedded in different professional fields. Similarly, the Sub-Saharan Africa FoRB Trainers Network links practitioners across 16 countries, providing continuity beyond individual projects and enabling cross-border sharing of strategies and lessons. In South Asia, a regional network played a similar bridging role by connecting organizations through regional convenings, thematic workshops, and follow-up collaboration. Its annual meetings combined regional peer learning with downstream country-level support, enabling partners to exchange tools, and align advocacy approaches. These peer networks gave activists, trainers, and faith leaders a sense of belonging to a wider movement. Participants gained not only tools and techniques but also confidence from seeing their peers address similar struggles elsewhere.

3. Interfaith and intrafaith engagement through interfaith advisory boards, mixed-faith committees guiding project strategy

Dialogue across and within religious groups proved to be one of the most consistent and effective strategies for advancing FoRB - 59% of survey respondents reported that this approach was effective in their work (Chart 6). Interfaith exchanges helped reduce fear and humanize "the other," while intrafaith conversations allowed communities to reflect on their own internal divisions and biases. In practice, this engagement took diverse forms: joint visits to places of worship, reconciliation retreats in neutral spaces, and permanent interfaith forums that paired religious leaders in parity roles to ensure equal voice. In several contexts, mixed-faith advisory boards were also established to guide project strategy, mediate with communities, and provide legitimacy

> *By linking FoRB to broader issues like peacebuilding, civic space, economic development, and the SDGs, the program highlighted its real-world significance.*
>
> **- Survey Respondent**

Photo by Prince Akachi / Unsplash.com

to FoRB activities. In some cases, platforms moved beyond dialogue into diapraxis – shared community projects that reinforced bonds through collective action. When designing such initiatives, it is important to prioritize neutral spaces and ensure equal representation so that no group dominates. Linking dialogue to visible joint actions, such as community projects or shared media messages, helps move conversations from words to trust-building practice.

Case Study

The project "Towards more freedom of religion and belief in Cambodia" was implemented by three local partners: Peace Bridges Organization (PBO), Continuing Learning Organization (CLO), Women Peace Makers (WPM). The project established local interfaith committees in two forested areas. PBO was working with local faith actors and local community-based organizations in two areas and the organization selected participants from indigenous groups and civil society for these committees.

PBO provided technical support to the committees, which met every quarter. PBO in consultation with the partners in communities and committees, set up a national committee that comprised representatives from the local committees as well as CSOs. The committees identified and addressed the specific advocacy issues. The advocacy messages of the interfaith committees targeted duty bearers at the local and national level, depending on the issue and how best to advocate for the particular issue. PBO set up a transparent grant mechanism to support the activities of the committees, such as events or products to raise awareness of and mobilize the general public on the specific advocacy messages.

As a result of these regular meetings and joint work religious leaders from different religious groups were able to learn from each other and they were able to change their attitude toward each other, at least among religious leaders. Despite the fact that people in these communities often grow up with the negative perception of people from other religions, during implementation of the project religious leaders who participated in the stakeholder meetings communicated to each other and even shared food. As one team member from CLO reflected, *"Normally, church religious leaders in Cambodia seldom come together. They are only invited by the department of cults and religions or the ministries of cults and religion once a year or twice a year to have the gathering, to share their progress, to share their ministry. But we are working in a different approach. So we gather them together quite often. We call interfaith groups set up. So later on, they become interfaith working groups coming together to work for the community's needs. So the opportunity to learn from one another is more. So they become more understanding among themselves. For example, in the case of the monks from Buddhist temples, they've been in a very close relationship with Christian pastors. For example, when they had a traditional Cambodian religious festival (Pchum Ben Festival Season), Cambodia's traditional Khmer New Year celebration, they brought some kind of Khmer cake and food for the pastor to give to the children's orphanage."*

4. Local ownership and leadership through community-led activities that enable local actors to design and deliver their own FoRB initiatives.

The sustainability of FoRB programming is closely linked to the extent of local ownership - 56% of survey respondents reported that this approach was effective in their work (Chart 6). Communities are often the first responders in times of crisis. Their contextual knowledge, cultural understanding, and networks position them to adapt initiatives to local realities and sustain change. Projects that supported local ownership did so by providing small, flexible grants or activity funds that enabled local leaders, youth groups, women's associations, and interfaith committees to design and implement their own initiatives. These arrangements allowed local trainers and religious leaders to facilitate dialogues, adapt FoRB messages to cultural norms and everyday practices, and establish grassroots committees to oversee follow-up. Such community-led approaches increased legitimacy and improved the likelihood that activities would continue beyond the project cycle. In Nigeria, small-scale grants supported interfaith youth groups to organize locally relevant activities, including community forums and cultural events addressing drivers of religious tension. Since the initiatives were conceived and led by participants themselves, they were viewed as credible within the community and better reflected local priorities. At the same time, the process contributed to the capacity of grant recipients themselves, who developed both technical skills such as project design and reporting, and soft skills such as facilitation, negotiation, and leadership. Providing modest funding alongside mentoring can strengthen capacity and accountability without imposing heavy external control. Ensuring balanced participation across community groups and building in simple mechanisms for follow-up increases both inclusiveness and sustainability.

> *Local leadership was key because community members know their own challenges, histories, and relationships better than anyone else. When they're trusted to plan and lead, the solutions are more relevant, accepted, and sustainable. It also gives people a sense of ownership and pride, which is essential for long-term peacebuilding and change.*
>
> *- Survey Respondent*

Photo by Yang Liu / Unsplash.com

5. Linkages between FoRB and broader issues as entry points and embedding into initiatives on livelihoods, youth employment, or education to sidestep political resistance and reach broader audiences.

Linking FoRB to broader issues offers a valuable approach to promoting FoRB in restrictive settings by linking it with other pressing societal issues. 51% of survey respondents reported this approach was effective (Chart 6). Topics such as hate speech in media, livelihoods, social cohesion, civic engagement, women empowerment, environment, etc. can serve as effective entry points for initiating dialogue. Linking FoRB to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was a common entry point: SDG 5 (Gender Equality) could be addressed through work with women's clubs and masculinity programs; SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) through interfaith dialogue and conflict prevention platforms; and SDG 4 (Quality Education) through working with children and youth. Civic engagement was another pathway, as faith leaders used FoRB knowledge to participate in county forums and governance structures, embedding rights into local decision-making. By addressing these interconnected challenges, projects can create pathways to introduce and build awareness about FoRB in ways that resonate with local priorities, reducing resistance and fostering constructive discussions.

Case Study

In Cambodia's Prey Long and Prey Preah Roka forests, local indigenous communities – particularly the Kuy people – regard forest areas, trees, and water sources as sacred. The project recognized that deforestation was not only an environmental crisis but also a violation of cultural and religious rights. Protecting these forests became a way to safeguard both indigenous identity and FoRB. Community rituals and collective ceremonies in the forests were reframed as expressions of FoRB, creating a strong rationale for their preservation.

Initially, other religious groups were hesitant to join forest protection activities that involved animist practices, fearing doctrinal conflict. Through facilitated FoRB training and interfaith dialogues, this resistance softened. Gradually, Christian, Muslim, and indigenous leaders began to participate together in rituals, ceremonies, and stewardship activities in the forest. This collaboration reframed forest protection as a shared responsibility rooted in both cultural heritage and religious freedom.

The project also encouraged communities to document sacred sites and their associated rituals. Using photographs, storytelling, and public celebrations, community members captured their intangible heritage for future generations. These activities raised awareness among youth and neighboring communities, who began to view indigenous practices not as outdated but as valuable cultural assets. By integrating storytelling and public festivals, the project amplified the visibility of FoRB concerns while embedding them in broader narratives of cultural dignity and environmental sustainability. Women also played a prominent role in these activities, often serving as ritual leaders or organizers of community events. Their leadership highlighted how FoRB intersects with gender and cultural rights. The recognition of women's spiritual authority within these practices created new space for female participation and contributed to shifting local perceptions of women's roles in both religious and civic life.

6. Inclusivity through deliberate steps to ensure that women, youth, and minority groups were actively included - not just as participants, but as decision-makers and leaders

Many FoRB initiatives recognized that sustainable change requires the active participation of groups who are often excluded from decision-making – particularly women, youth, and religious minorities. 49% of survey respondents reported that this approach was effective in their work (Chart 6). Projects therefore went beyond inviting these groups as participants and deliberately positioned them as leaders, trainers, and agenda-setters. Women facilitated advocacy efforts and interfaith dialogues; young people were trained as multipliers who could influence both peers and authorities; and minority representatives were integrated into leadership structures of community forums. By creating spaces where these actors could shape priorities and guide implementation, projects not only broadened representation but also enhanced the legitimacy, creativity, and resilience of FoRB work.

Case Study

One good example of formal-to-informal advocacy initiatives comes from Kenya. In Isiolo County, the Free Pentecostal Fellowship of Kenya developed a "Mother-to-Mother" initiative that linked religious tolerance with women's everyday roles and social needs. Women with infants first gathered in workshops designed to be child-friendly, and from there began visiting each other's homes across religious lines. For many, it was the first time seeing a Christian or Muslim woman welcomed inside the family space. These visits modeled tolerance to husbands and children, reframed difference as social connection rather than threat, and laid the groundwork for FoRB women's groups that later engaged in table banking and mutual support. By centering women as agents of coexistence, the initiative advanced both gender equality and peacebuilding, demonstrating how FoRB can be embedded in daily practices of care, livelihood, and family life. What began as a donor-funded activity continued through women's own efforts, showing that linking FoRB to familiar social needs can sidestep resistance and create sustainable forms of interfaith cooperation.

The most significant change we've seen is that people—especially those who were once silent or sidelined—now feel like they have a voice and a place in conversations about faith, identity, and community life. For a long time, Indigenous communities, women, and minority faith groups felt ignored or even afraid to speak openly about their beliefs. This project changed that. Through the spaces we created together—dialogues, trainings, and interfaith events—people began to open up. Trust started to grow. Community members who had never spoken in public before shared their experiences. Women who once sat quietly in the back started leading conversations. Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Indigenous leaders began working side by side—not just talking about tolerance, but actually building relationships based on mutual respect. That shift—from fear and isolation to trust and collaboration—is deeply meaningful. It may not always be loud or dramatic, but it's real. And for many of us involved, it's a sign of long-term change: communities that are more inclusive, more peaceful, and more united, even in the face of difference. That's something we're proud to be part of.

- Survey Respondent

7. Dedicated safe spaces created through both place - neutral "desert" meeting spaces - and participants - where participants can build trust and connect as humans before addressing divisive issues without fear of reprisal

Creating safe spaces emerged as a central strategy for enabling participation in FoRB programming, particularly for women, youth, and children - 41% of survey respondents reported that this approach was effective in their work (Chart 6). These spaces took many forms — from women- or men-only peer groups, child clubs, and household visits to interfaith storytelling circles and closed online forums. By offering environments free from intimidation and external pressure, projects allowed individuals to share experiences, process sensitive issues, and build trust across divides. In some contexts, these spaces connected participants with psychosocial or legal support; in others, they evolved into self-sustaining associations or savings groups that fostered both solidarity and resilience. Whether physical or virtual, temporary or institutionalized, safe spaces consistently served as gateways for vulnerable groups to engage more confidently in dialogue, develop leadership skills, and initiate FoRB-related action within their communities.

Case Study

Musalaha, meaning "Reconciliation" in Arabic, is a faith-based organization founded in 1990 based in Jerusalem and working both in Israel and Palestine. The organization facilitates reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds and has worked with Den Danske Israelsmission and CKU since 2020 and the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Norway (ELFCN) and Digni since 2024. Advancing FoRB in this context requires overcoming immense physical and ideological divides between communities and working within structural and institutional limitations. Working amidst the highly insecure ongoing conflict and daily violence in Israel and Palestine, Musalaha's tried and tested reconciliation methodology achieves the seemingly impossible by bringing Israelis and Palestinians together in dialogue and joint action using faith-based principles with a multidisciplinary approach to reconciliation as a starting point for addressing FoRB violations.

The first step of Musalaha's reconciliation methodology, the "desert encounter", is framed by the need to create safe space and a deep understanding of what creates safe space for participants living in violent conflict. Participants, who are carefully selected through a thorough vetting process, are brought together in the Wadi Rum desert in Jordan. This location is thoughtfully selected for the many aspects of a safe space that it emulates. It removes participants from the threats to their physical safety and security in Israel and Palestine, as well as the surveillance and restrictions on movement in terms of check points. It also removes participants from their community and the social stigma and restraints that can impact their ability to engage openly. *"It allows people also to start approaching each other as humans to humans. And it's kind of like this kind of instigates that ability to reimagine. Because you're awake, you can literally breathe. You're not being suffocated by the occupation or by your community,"* Musalaha's program team reflected.

This space is also important for what it brings as well as for what it removes. The spiritual importance of the desert resonates with all three faith groups engaged in the reconciliation activities. As one Musalah's team member shared, *"In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the desert holds a significant space because it's where people have gone through transformation or where all different people went to the desert and there was some kind of encounter with the divine that has led to these traditions that we understand today. We don't obviously impose that or say anything about that because that's not our job, but it's part of the reason why we go to the desert. Place is key."* The use of this specific spiritually and historically significant space is also part of Musalaha's intentional efforts to indigenize the

reconciliation process, making it resonate with communities and increasing its impact.

The crucial role of the desert as a safe space has been documented in Musalaha's monitoring and evaluation of their programs. The organization employs anonymous surveys to track changes in participants' attitudes, revealing increased openness to reconciliation following the desert encounters. This creates the entry point for the follow up engagement and joint actions, which further reinforce the reconciliation and relationship building process. The foundation, this creation of a safe space for reconciliation and understanding, remains key throughout the process.

8. FoRB definitions based on the local context and using inclusive, non-confrontational terminology to reduce political sensitivity and resistance.

Direct references to "human rights," "FoRB," or "advocacy" often triggered suspicion, politicization, or resistance, so projects reframed their messaging in ways that resonated locally. Partners used phrases like "all communities," "coexistence," "harmony," "human dignity" instead of "minorities," to facilitate constructive dialogue. 39% of survey respondents reported that faith-based or contextual framing was an effective approach in their work (Chart 6). This included grounding concepts in familiar values such as dignity, freedom, or coexistence; drawing on scripture and religious teachings for credibility; and linking issues to everyday experiences like discrimination in schools or community solidarity. In some cases, legal or policy references were used only when authorities were receptive, while at the community level FoRB was discussed through stories, personal choices, or shared cultural heritage. Regional initiatives emphasized diversity and pluralism rather than minority protection, reducing perceptions of external agendas. At the same time, safeguards are important: overly diluting rights concepts risks obscuring FoRB itself, so balance is needed between accessibility and integrity.

"What works well seems to be when the concepts of FoRB are translated to daily life for participants, so it is not learning about some international legal frameworks but has to do with their own felt experiences. Even for duty bearers this is an effective approach.

- Survey Respondent

9. Intersectionality to tailor interventions to the needs of specific groups and intersecting identities - such as gender, ethnicity, disability, or social status

Projects also revealed that FoRB cannot be addressed in isolation from overlapping forms of marginalization. Women from minority faiths, for example, faced a "double vulnerability" linked to both gender and religious identity. Converts often experienced exclusion from both their former and new communities, making them particularly exposed to stigma and violence. Youth reported being sidelined due to age hierarchies while simultaneously facing discrimination tied to their beliefs. Attention to intersecting identities - such as gender, ethnicity, disability, or social status - helped tailor interventions to the needs of specific groups. 39% of survey respondents reported that this approach was effective in their work (Chart 6). Where projects actively considered these overlaps, they were better able to design responses that addressed the complexity of lived realities, whether through women-focused training, youth storytelling initiatives, or interfaith platforms that included minority voices. These cases illustrate that FoRB violations often intersect with broader structural inequalities, and that programming must account for these compounded risks rather than treating religious freedom as a single-issue concern.

10. **Grassroots mobilization through art and creative expression as vehicles for inclusive FoRB messages to attract and engage audiences who might avoid explicitly "rights-based" events**

Engaging communities at the grassroots level was effective for 37% of survey respondents (Chart 6). Promoting FoRB through creative approaches, such as arts and culture, offers several key advantages, particularly in countries with restrictive environments on human rights. These methods are more culturally sensitive and less confrontational than direct advocacy or legal challenges, which makes them safer for local communities and organizations working on FoRB. The advantage of these approaches is that they allow participants to explore sensitive issues indirectly, using art or cultural activities as a medium to spark conversations about religious tolerance and inclusion without provoking backlash from authorities. Moreover, it's not just about making it safer or less confrontational – creative methods can engage communities that might otherwise resist direct advocacy. By using familiar cultural forms, such as theater, traditional music, dance, or visual arts, projects can reach audiences that are not typically receptive to rights-based messaging. This opens pathways for building awareness, fostering empathy, and ultimately gaining buy-in for religious and ethnic freedom. These activities serve as an entry point for deeper conversations about tolerance, allowing participants to reflect on their own biases and become allies in promoting inclusive values, often without even realizing they are engaging in human rights work. This subtle yet impactful approach helps secure community support and builds a foundation for longer-term change.

Case Study

Eastleigh, a densely populated neighborhood in Nairobi, Kenya, is home to Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and other faith communities living side by side. While diversity is part of its identity, it has also bred tension and occasional conflict, particularly in moments of wider political or international crisis. For young people, stereotypes and mistrust often outweighed opportunities for collaboration. In this environment, the Peace at Heart Initiative Network (PHIN) experimented with creative grassroots mobilization to spark dialogue on freedom of religion or belief.

After initial community consultations and youth training sessions, PHIN introduced a new strategy in early 2024: community theater. The idea was simple but powerful – dramatize everyday experiences of religious tension and coexistence, and then invite the audience to reflect. Theater was chosen because it attracts large crowds in public spaces and communicates complex messages in an accessible, entertaining, and emotionally resonant way. For residents who might never attend a workshop on rights, a street performance offered a non-threatening entry point into FoRB themes.

PHIN partnered with a local theater group to design performances based on real challenges faced by the community. Scripts highlighted situations such as derogatory remarks toward minority groups, unequal treatment in schools, or the exclusion of women from decision-making because of faith or gender. The performances were staged in busy parts of Eastleigh, where passersby naturally gathered to watch.

What made the format effective was not only the drama itself but the structured dialogue that followed. After each performance, facilitators – often the same youth who had been trained in FoRB earlier in the project – engaged the audience in open conversation. They asked what people saw in the play, whether it reflected their own experiences, and how communities could respond differently. This combination of visual storytelling and participatory dialogue turned a performance into a collective learning moment.

11. Multi-stakeholder dialogue to broadly enhance reach, credibility, and collective problem-solving capacity for FoRB issues

Many projects used dialogue as a practical tool for problem-solving and inclusion, engaging a wide range of actors: religious leaders, government officials, educators, and community activists - 34% of survey respondents reported finding this strategy effective (Chart 6). In Mali and Kenya, for instance, these dialogues led to the creation of local committees that worked on joint initiatives, such as school access, interfaith harmony days, or conflict mediation. To be effective these dialogue platforms applied layered trust-building - starting with neutral topics and gradually moving to FoRB issues as trust grows. After building mutual trust, the platforms were able to advance to discuss difficult issues—such as minority discrimination or gender-based exclusion - to be addressed in constructive ways.

12. Media campaigns using a "T approach" (deep + broad) that combines small, intensive group work with broad outreach through media and public campaigns to amplify FoRB messages and normalize inclusive narratives in public discourse

Media plays a critical and multifaceted role in advancing FoRB, particularly in sensitive contexts where open civic engagement is limited. 32% of survey respondents reported finding this strategy effective (Chart 6). Its reach through satellite and digital broadcasting enables mass outreach that normalizes conversations around dignity, interfaith understanding, and personal belief in ways that traditional on-ground activism often cannot. At the same time, media creates safe spaces for those restricted by social norms, mobility, or security risks, offering lifelines such as educational programming during conflicts. By contextualizing complex human rights concepts into culturally resonant formats - through storytelling, comedy, drama, or personal narratives - media makes FoRB both accessible and relatable, encouraging empathy and reducing resistance to sensitive issues. Equally important is the media's capacity to foster emotional engagement and sustained reflection. Personal stories and dramas can inspire transformation, shifting perspectives from fear or indifference toward shared values and hope. Creative campaigns subtly challenge restrictive norms, sparking discussion without confrontation, while in high-risk environments, tailored media provides critical legal and practical information to vulnerable groups. With its 24/7 adaptability, media ensures continuous reinforcement of key themes, quickly adjusting content in response to crises or conflicts. In essence, media translates abstract principles into lived experiences, embedding FoRB into the everyday lives of diverse audiences and gradually shaping social attitudes and norms.

The most effective media-based approach for promoting FoRB has proven to be the "T-approach" or "Dual-Track Engagement" model. This strategy combines two complementary tracks: a "Deep" track, which fosters personal transformation through localized, intensive engagement such as community discussions and online support groups; and a "Broad" track, which amplifies messages through wide-scale media outreach using emotional and relatable content across satellite broadcasting, dramatized stories, and digital platforms. Together, these tracks generate both meaningful individual and community-level change, while also building broad public awareness and acceptance of FoRB principles.

Case Study

SAT-7, a Christian satellite television network, has effectively implemented a dual-track engagement strategy to promote FoRB and human dignity across the MENA. Operating in highly sensitive environments, SAT-7 has adopted an approach that combines deep, localized interventions with broad, emotionally resonant media outreach.

The 'deep' track focuses on intensive, small-scale group work designed to foster personal reflection and change. This involves community screenings of SAT-7 content, followed by facilitated discussions in safe spaces where participants can share experiences and access support if needed. Online closed community groups, like one with over 7,000 women, serve as vital peer support networks, fostering initiatives and sharing empowering content in an informal 'training of trainers' model. Through storytelling clubs and workshops, often in collaboration with local organizations, real-life experiences of discrimination and positive change are collected and adapted. For instance, children were trained as 'local reporters' to interview family and religious leaders, encouraging questioning and understanding of diverse perspectives within their own communities. In contexts like Egypt, the FoRB language is carefully contextualized, avoiding any perception of challenging governmental or religious institutions. Playful, localized campaigns, such as women in an Egyptian village wearing white sneakers, are utilized to subtly challenge social norms and encourage discussion without direct confrontation.

Complementing this deep engagement, the 'broad' track leverages SAT-7's extensive media platforms to amplify FoRB messages and normalize inclusive narratives in public discourse, often through emotional messaging. With more than 15 million viewers across its Arabic, Turkish, and Persian channels, SAT-7 continuously infuses its messages through round-the-clock broadcasting and digital platforms. The network deliberately uses dramatized stories and soap operas, often inspired by the real-life experiences gathered from the 'deep' track, to create relatable narratives that depict shared human values. This approach aims for emotional engagement rather than simply delivering hard news, providing hope and a sense of connection, especially during times of conflict. Digital engagement, including viewer support groups and online discussion forums, extends the conversation beyond the broadcast, allowing for continued interaction and support. The communication strategy avoids formal 'human rights' or 'advocacy' language, which could be misconstrued as anti-government. Instead, SAT-7 uses personal stories, cultural expressions like music and film, and carefully frames its messaging to resonate with local audiences and even align with published governmental policies where possible.
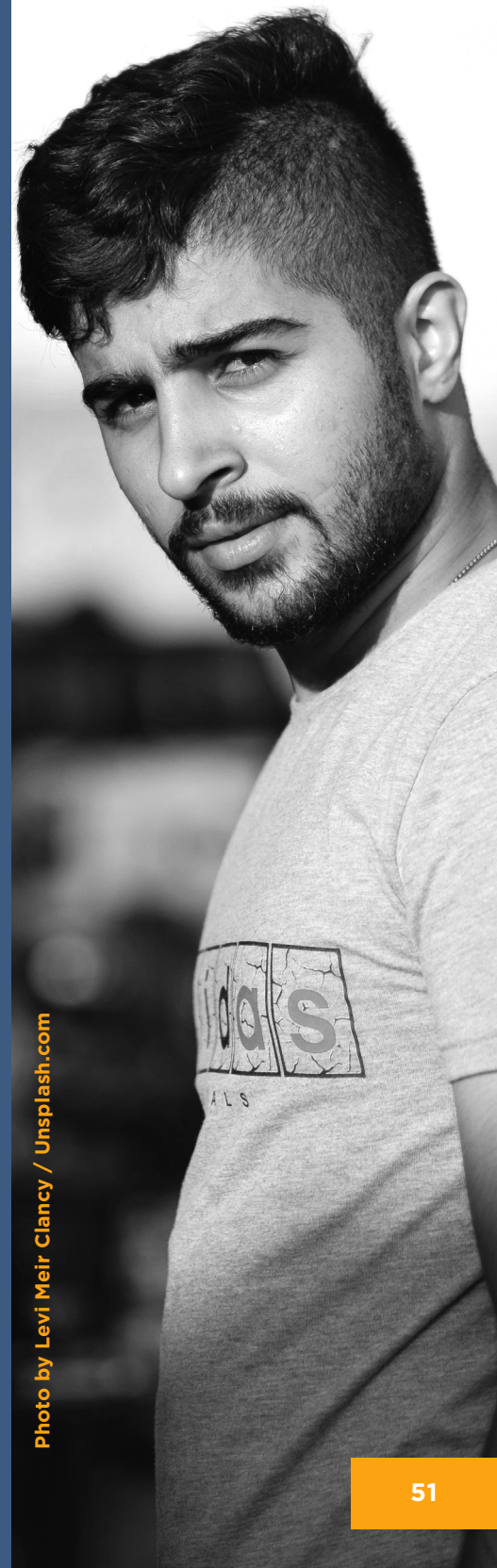
13. Story-telling and using real-life FoRB role models to inspire tolerance and empathy, humanizing complex issues, and helping participants process personal experiences

Storytelling emerged as one of the most powerful practices for advancing FoRB, because it humanizes complex issues and makes values relatable across divides. Instead of relying on abstract rights language, projects used personal narratives, drama, and creative formats to reach audiences who might otherwise disengage. Storytelling took many forms: small group "story clubs" that surfaced lived experiences later dramatized for television; comedy or serial dramas that carried coexistence messages into millions of homes; anonymized testimonies and citizen journalism shared safely in divided communities; and child-friendly metaphors that translated dignity and tolerance into everyday language. These approaches not only helped participants process their own experiences but also created shared narratives that strengthened empathy and social cohesion. Narratives need to remain authentic and culturally resonant, reflecting lived experiences. Also, careful safeguarding – through anonymization, editorial sensitivity, and gradual scaling – is essential to protect participants while allowing stories to build empathy and trust across divides. Only 27% of survey respondents reported using this approach in their work, indicating the potential to expand its application (Chart 6).

Case Study

LEADS, a Sri Lankan agency established in 1983 and registered as an approved charity, is dedicated to creating safer spaces and brighter futures for children. As part of a pilot project with CKU, LEADS developed the "Superheroes Model," inspired by popular comic book superheroes such as Spider-Man, Wonder Woman, Superman, Batman, Ironman, Captain Marvel, The Hulk, and the Powerpuff Girls. Drawing on their heroic qualities, the initiative provided a shared platform where children from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds could come together, fostering inclusivity and mutual respect.

The model encouraged children to embody values of service, courage, and responsibility, empowering them to lead positive changes in their communities while promoting freedom of religion and belief and religious equality. By framing these values through the familiar and playful lens of superheroes, the tool made sensitive topics of social integration and harmony more accessible and engaging among children as well as their parents. It also aimed at creating a common platform for children of different identity groups to come together and see each other through one common lens. It also intended to bring the community members together with understanding and respect towards good qualities and heroic characteristics. To support wider use, LEADS documented the approach in a booklet titled Superhero Model: A Framework for Child-Led Community Integration. This resource, structured into practical sessions for community roll-out, has since been shared with other organizations interested in advancing child participation in development.

The superhero tool was introduced in child clubs through interactive sessions aimed at identifying child leaders. Discussions began with simple, engaging questions such as "Who is a superhero?" and "What is special about superheroes?", which immediately sparked interest. The timing of the initiative was particularly effective, as it aligned with the global popularity of superheroes like the Avengers, Spiderman, and Iron Man, making it easy to capture children's imagination. To deepen engagement, children were encouraged to draw and design their own superheroes, envisioning the powers and values they admired. As the sessions progressed, the focus gradually

shifted from fictional powers to real-life values, emphasizing that one does not need extraordinary abilities to be a hero. Ordinary people, such as parents or effective government officers, were highlighted as community superheroes, and role models like Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa were introduced to reinforce the message that service, integrity, and compassion are the greatest "superpowers."

The tool proved to be a turning point in engaging children on the topic of social harmony, a subject often considered dull or complex when linked to religion. Through its child-friendly approach, the tool fostered leadership development, with some children emerging as leaders who carried the message to new villages during the project's second phase. It also boosted confidence, as children discovered their self-worth, developed public speaking skills, and even assumed leadership roles within their schools. The sessions remained lively and attractive, sustaining children's motivation and curiosity throughout the process. Parents and adults warmly welcomed the initiative, recognizing the personal growth, confidence, and active participation it inspired in their children.

The success of the superhero tool highlighted several important lessons. First, child-friendly framing proved highly effective, as transforming abstract concepts into playful narratives made them both accessible and memorable for children. Second, cultural relevance played a key role, with the use of popular superheroes capturing children's attention and drawing them into discussions that might otherwise have felt heavy. Finally, the tool successfully bridged fantasy and reality by guiding children from imagining fictional heroes to recognizing real-life role models, which created a lasting impact and instilled values of responsibility and service.

The superhero tool was more than a creative experiment – it became a catalyst for child leadership and social integration. By linking fun, imagination, and values, LEADS successfully engaged children as agents of change. The tool not only equipped them to see themselves as superheroes in their communities but also inspired wider acceptance and enthusiasm among families and partner organizations.

14. Locally led advocacy at multiple levels, ranging from discreet diplomacy to public campaigns and international engagement.

Although only 12% of survey respondents reported using advocacy strategies effectively, those who did ranged from discreet local engagement to formal contributions in international forums (Chart 6). At the country level, faith leaders and civil society actors worked with county forums, education authorities, and national faith councils to diffuse FoRB messages and calm emerging tensions. In Kenya, leaders became trusted interlocutors for local officials, while in Sri Lanka organizations engaged provincial authorities and interreligious councils to socialize FoRB norms. At the regional level, regional networks supported civil society submissions to the UPR (Bangladesh), raised urgent concerns such as the Manipur violence in the European Parliament, and coordinated diplomatic briefings with EU and Danish representatives. This model combines national convenings and technical support with "upstreaming" results to international institutions. Advocacy also relied on networks as multipliers. Regional platforms created shared framing and contacts that members used for country workshops, media interventions, and policy updates, effectively translating regional legitimacy into national entry points. Where formal advocacy was not feasible, projects often supported informal negotiation processes with gatekeepers or community leaders.

15. State buy-in by engaging duty-bearers through memorandums of understanding, joint forums, and official partnerships

Projects that prioritize early and respectful engagement with state authorities while simultaneously building their capacity for understanding religious freedom can create long-term pathways to systemic change. Early and proactive engagement with state authorities is essential for obtaining necessary approvals and avoiding obstruction in restrictive settings. Presenting the work as indirectly benefiting state stability or development aligns with state priorities, making it easier to gain support or at least neutrality from officials. While government buy-in allows the project to move forward, working with duty bearers also provides opportunities to gradually shift their understanding of FoRB, even if indirectly. Engaging government officials in capacity-building activities, such as training sessions or policy discussions, can improve their literacy on FoRB principles. Over time, even conservative or cautious officials may begin to better understand and apply these principles, creating a more supportive environment for FoRB. In Tanzania, one interviewee stressed that involving government actors was essential for creating trust around FoRB initiatives. He explained that when activities were framed as partnerships with local authorities, communities were more willing to engage and less suspicious of hidden agendas. Government presence lent legitimacy, reassured participants that FoRB work aligned with national priorities, and opened sensitive spaces for dialogue. This connection reduced the risk for community members but also positioned the project for longer-term sustainability and policy influence by embedding it within official structures rather than as an outside effort.

16. Legal action and developing FoRB litigation resources by training lawyers and mobilizing them to support victims of FoRB violations and representing victims in litigation on FoRB.

Victims of discrimination or violence on the basis of religion often face severe barriers in accessing justice: weak knowledge of FoRB among lawyers, fear of retaliation, and selective or slow judicial systems. Historically, there has been a struggle to find lawyers willing to take up FoRB cases, leaving many victims without remedy and reinforcing impunity. The good practice here is to strengthen the legal fraternity's capacity to defend FoRB. This includes training and capacity-building for lawyers to build a sustainable pool of defenders.

Resource development, such as practical litigation guides in local languages, increases accessibility and continuity. Mobilization for litigation remains challenging, but cases where lawyers do step up mark an important cultural shift in legal communities. Finally, integration with broader advocacy frameworks – such as regional FoRB networks or submissions to UN mechanisms – complements case-by-case litigation with systemic pressure for change. For example, in Sri Lanka the partner sought to address the lack of legal capacity around FoRB by training lawyers, particularly younger practitioners, on how to handle FoRB-related cases. The partner complemented this with the development of a practical litigation guide in Sinhala and Tamil, ensuring accessibility for a wider pool of legal actors. As a result, a small but growing group of lawyers began to take on FoRB cases, offering representation to victims who previously had little access to justice. These mark an important foundation for building a sustainable pool of legal advocates able to link individual casework with broader FoRB advocacy efforts. Building legal capacity for FoRB is slow and sensitive work. Training needs to be coupled with practical resources in local languages and safe professional networks, so that lawyers feel both equipped and supported to take on these cases.

> Capacity building for local actors helped shift power into the hands of those who live the reality. By training local facilitators, faith leaders, and youth in areas like conflict transformation, communication, and rights awareness, the project gave people tools to act—not just rely on outsiders. This built confidence, ownership, and long-term leadership from within the community itself.
>
> *- Survey Respondent*

Building legal capacity is key to advancing FoRB justice. Training lawyers, creating local-language guides, and linking with advocacy networks are helping victims access representation and fostering a growing pool of legal defenders.

Photo by Gabriella Clare Marino / Unsplash.com

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7. FoRB Programming Challenges and Lessons Learned

During the implementation of FoRB projects, partners encountered a range of contextual, operational, and conceptual challenges. However, many of these difficulties also generated learning that helped refine strategies and strengthen future interventions. The following section synthesizes the most frequently observed challenges alongside the key lessons that emerged from efforts to address them.

1. **Navigating restrictive political and social environments** – FoRB programming often faced political scrutiny, institutional control, security risks, and societal resistance that affected both implementers and participants. In several contexts, governments or religious authorities viewed FoRB initiatives as subversive, leading to surveillance, censorship, and disrupted activities. Projects demonstrated that FoRB work can provoke defensive reactions both from government and local communities when it touches on entrenched traditions or power relations, particularly around gender roles, conversion, or minority rights. In Sri Lanka, a complaint by a Buddhist monk led to official inquiries; in Egypt, police confiscated media equipment; and in East Africa, partners feared that sensitive data could expose communities to reprisals. Projects learned that sustaining engagement in restrictive environments requires integrated protection strategies. This includes proactive risk assessment, flexible and discreet communication, and strong digital and ethical safeguards for information management. Adjusting language (see Good Practice #8), maintaining secure data protocols, and engaging trusted intermediaries enabled organizations to reduce exposure while maintaining credibility. The review also highlighted the importance of navigating the sensitivity of social and cultural norms by framing discussions around broadly shared principles such as dignity, fairness, and peaceful coexistence. This together with engaging trusted intermediaries, helps reduce resistance and create space for more delicate issues over time. FoRB work in restrictive contexts must combine this political sensitivity with robust participant and data protection to remain both safe and effective.

2. **Managing community suspicion and fear of proselytism** – At the community level, FoRB work sometimes provoked suspicion that programs aimed at religious conversion or are favoring one faith group or political agenda. In Tanzania, Muslim leaders initially blocked a film screening they believed to be evangelistic, and in Kenya a project had to change its title to avoid singling out Muslim women. Such incidents revealed deep-seated anxieties around proselytism. On the other hand, in Tanzania, Christian participants expected preferential treatment from a church-led program; in Cambodia, government authorities attempted to police interfaith gatherings; in Palestine, some schools refused participation based on the implementing organization's Christian identity. Projects learned that credibility and trust must be built through transparency and visible neutrality. Managing these dynamics required visible neutrality, balanced participation of different groups, and transparent communication about program goals. Early consultations with local authorities, joint leadership structures in interfaith forums, and consistent follow-up visits helped mitigate fears and demonstrate that initiatives sought mutual respect rather than conversion. When handled well, these steps built trust and prevented the escalation of suspicion into conflict.

3. **Responding to backlash in media and digital spaces** – Media-based initiatives also encountered resistance in the digital sphere. Programming in MENA on women rejecting traditional roles sparked harsh criticism from conservative commentators, while online videos on sensitive religious themes such as hijab were met with backlash and misinterpretation. In some cases, negative reactions forced organizations to withdraw episodes that offended specific religious communities, even when the content aimed to promote equality. Partners learned that media engagement requires adaptive safeguarding: framing FoRB in less confrontational terms such as "coexistence" or "diversity", moderating online spaces, and applying trauma-sensitive facilitation reduced exposure to harm while maintaining meaningful dialogue. The balance between constructive provocation and participant safety emerged as a key area for continued learning.

4. **Addressing gender-based vulnerabilities** – Women and converts bore disproportionate risks in FoRB programming. In Morocco, Islamic feminists advocating equal inheritance rights were pushed out of leadership positions, while in Sri Lanka and MENA, women human rights defenders faced online harassment, surveillance, and community stigma. Some women could only join programs with explicit approval from male relatives, and their participation was sometimes met with suspicion from both majority and minority groups. These patterns underscored how gender norms shape both access and vulnerability. Projects learned that gender-sensitive design must be embedded from the outset. Creating women-only or men-only spaces, supporting women's legal literacy, negotiating with male leaders for participation, and linking FoRB messaging to accepted religious and cultural narratives enabled women to engage more safely and meaningfully.

5. **Emotional risks and psychological vulnerabilities** – FoRB initiatives often create spaces for participants to revisit painful experiences. Women in media programs linked past trauma to faith teachings; participants from Israel and Palestine expressed profound mistrust of fellow project participants; and survivors of violent conflict in India hesitated to join dialogues. Partners realized that trauma-informed facilitation and psychosocial support are not optional additions but integral to ethical practice. Programs that offered pre-dialogue sessions, one-on-one support, or pastoral accompaniment created safer spaces for healing and constructive exchange.

6. **Mitigating risks in violent or extremist settings** – In fragile and polarized environments, FoRB initiatives sometimes risked inflaming tensions or exposing participants to violence. In Kenya and Tanzania, projects operated under the shadow of Al-Shabaab recruitment, past clashes, and deep mistrust between faith communities. In Cameroon, reintegration of Boko Haram returnees provoked resentment from victims' families, who questioned the fairness of reconciliation. Advocacy in particular could be perceived as provocation, and in Sudan projects had to suspend activities entirely due to civil war. To reduce risks, implementers framed their work around peacebuilding and coexistence, involved government authorities as neutral conveners, and established balanced interfaith forums. These strategies helped mitigate tensions but could not fully prevent escalation, showing the limits of programming in volatile security environments.

7. **Strengthening program design and sustainability** – Some of the limitations observed in FoRB programming stemmed from internal design and operational constraints rather than external risks. In several cases, projects effectively raised awareness and empathy but lacked clear pathways

to translate attitudinal change into collective or structural outcomes. Many initiatives were designed primarily for short implementation cycles and relied on limited funding, which constrained opportunities for consolidation, reflection, and institutional uptake. As a result, changes often remained at the personal or interpersonal level rather than extending to organizational or policy spheres. At the same time, contextual and operational barriers further limited program reach. Regional trainer networks experienced uneven participation due to varying national contexts and coordination challenges, while blended and digital formats struggled with connectivity issues. Intra-faith tensions, doctrinal boundaries, and competing community priorities also shaped what was achievable within project timeframes.

The consistency mattered. Showing up again and again—even when it was difficult— helped build the trust needed for people to start sharing, listening, and eventually collaborating.

- Survey Respondent

These experiences highlight that sustainable impact requires early attention to scope, scale, and structural pathways. Designing FoRB programs with achievable institutional goals, alongside community-level work, and allocating sufficient duration and resources for consolidation and adaptation can bridge the gap between personal transformation and systemic change. Many of the unintended effects pushed projects to rethink their strategies, often leading to more sustainable and credible approaches. Shifting from confrontational advocacy to collaborative dialogue in Cambodia, replacing technical legal language with everyday narratives in India, or producing interreligious charters in MENA are examples where adaptation transformed tensions into opportunities. Responsiveness to context allows FoRB initiatives to maintain relevance, legitimacy, and safety.

A cross-cutting lesson is that effective FoRB programming in sensitive contexts is less about immediate breakthroughs and more about gradually widening the boundaries of what can be discussed. Projects that created safe and trusted environments – whether through interfaith forums, community storytelling, or carefully moderated media spaces – were able to introduce sensitive issues step by step without triggering severe backlash. This incremental approach not only reduced risks but also built resilience among participants, making space for deeper conversations over time. Long-term support for adaptive, stepwise strategies is critical, even if visible outcomes appear more modest at first. Investing in processes that carefully expand dialogue and normalize engagement around FoRB lays the foundation for durable change and reduces the likelihood of harmful unintended effects.

8. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

Despite MEL systems in CKU and Digni being well structured through an established system and structure in place, the partners are executing MEL work, often, through part time coverage from the program team members to oversee data planning, collection, analysis, and reporting. As guided by the system developed at the secretariat level, planning of strategy, log frames/MEL plans are developed by the local partners with technical support/advice from grant holders. A core element of these systems is the development of log frames and MEL plans, typically created alongside proposals and design documents, often drawing on a theory of change approach. These frameworks are not only guided by donor requirements but are also contextualized to local realities, with community stakeholders—such as religious leaders, youth, and women - engaged in shaping indicators and outcomes. Indicators are designed to be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) and sensitive to context, though establishing baselines for qualitative shifts like attitudes and behaviors remains a persistent challenge.

Capacity building is also central, as organizations invest in strengthening the ability of partners and communities to engage in log frame development, contextual analysis, and adaptive learning. There is a high satisfaction among partners about the usefulness of the MEL tools provided by CKU and Digni. **76% of the surveyed partners said that the project's MEL tools are useful (35% "very useful" and 41% "moderately useful") and about half (49%) of the surveyed partners have not had any challenges in MEL with only about a third (32%) have faced challenges (Chart 7).** However, these numbers are based on a small sample size and responses from project partners primarily focused on collecting output-level data, with only a few exceptions where case studies or success stories were gathered. As such, this level of satisfaction may be more closely tied to the technical support and guidance provided by CKU, Digni, and grant holders, rather than reflecting the broader MEL capabilities needed to effectively capture outcomes and impact. These challenges faced by the one-third of partners are further highlighted in the section below.
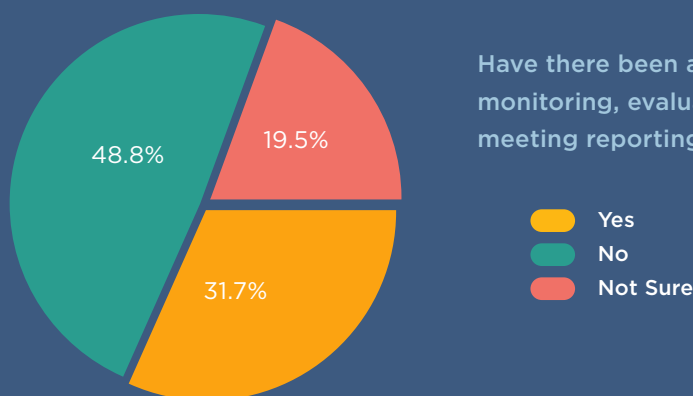
Have there been any challenges in applying monitoring, evaluation, and learning tools or meeting reporting expectations?

- 🟡 Yes
- 🟢 No
- 🔴 Not Sure

48.8%
19.5%
31.7%

Chart 7: Survey Results on MEL Challenges

Measuring impact in areas such as media-based initiatives on FoRB projects is particularly complex, as attitudinal and behavioral changes are difficult to quantify, direct questioning often produces socially desirable responses, and politically sensitive contexts demand cautious wording and careful engagement. Challenges further arise from government scrutiny, limited accessibility of digital tools at the grassroots, donor pressure for numerical indicators, and the risks of causing harm in fragile interfaith or political settings. Ultimately, while MEL systems provide critical structure, their effectiveness depends on balancing donor accountability with contextual sensitivity, managing the inherent difficulties of measuring attitudinal change, and ensuring that monitoring itself does not reinforce tensions or risks in fragile environments.

Photo by WWC Tanzania

8.1. EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

While there were limitations in collecting and analyzing outcome and impact-level data—primarily due to the absence of dedicated MEL staff and a robust data management system at the partner level—the learning review process surfaced several noteworthy MEL strengths. Below are some of the effective practices identified within the MEL process.

1. Participatory and context-sensitive monitoring

- Involving community actors in data collection and using trusted intermediaries in sensitive contexts. Key community stakeholders, such as religious leaders, youth, women, and community leaders, are actively engaged in collecting data from the project activities. This is often done through bi-monthly inter-religious meetings or workshops, ensuring that the monitoring framework reflects the perspectives and priorities of those most affected by the projects. Emphasizing the important community participation and role of key people in this process. As one local partner shared, *"When local faith leaders collect the data, people speak more openly."* Similarly, another local partner said, *"key community stakeholders, religious leaders, youth and women were engaged during bi-monthly inter-religious meetings, and their views were analyzed to develop project indicators."* Any issues (positive or negative) related to religion are embedded in social and personal values and cultural settings and transforming such values and shifting people's attitude and behavior requires unlearning of the past, which therefore religious leaders are highly capable and well placed to do. And collecting sensitive data related to FoRB also gets better credibility when mobilizing these actors.

- Stakeholder specific data collection tools: Tools for data collection are developed according to the specific stakeholders involved in different project outcomes. This acknowledges that different groups may require different approaches and instruments for effective data collection. This also involved shifting the languages and working according to the stakeholder groups. For grassroots communities, questions and tools are adapted for different literacy levels. This demonstrates a sensitivity to the diverse needs and capacities of participants, making monitoring accessible and inclusive.

- Contextualization of indicators and data: Indicators are contextualized to the specific local situation. This ensures that the indicators are relevant and meaningful within the particular cultural, social, and political environment of the project.

- Language and wording: Great care is taken in phrasing questions, especially on sensitive topics like FoRB. Sensitive terms are sometimes replaced with more neutral language to avoid problems and ensure that data collection is conducted in a way that is culturally appropriate and does not cause harm or tension.
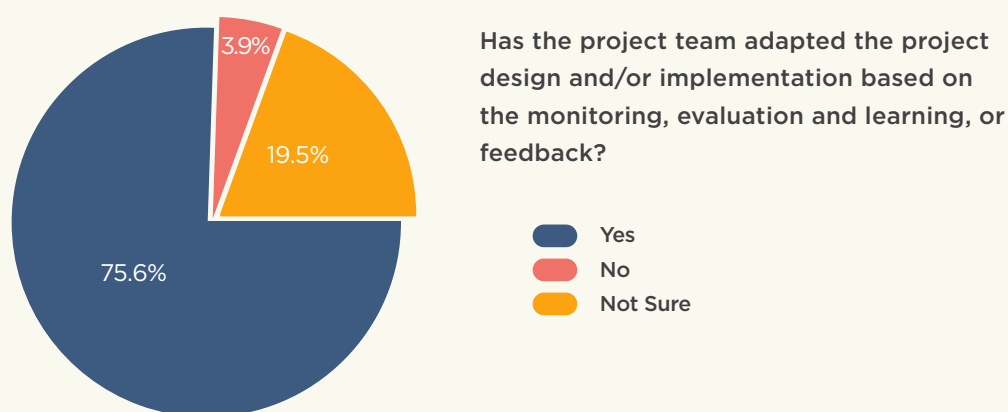
Has the project team adapted the project design and/or implementation based on the monitoring, evaluation and learning, or feedback?

- ■ Yes
- ■ No
- ■ Not Sure

Chart 8: Survey Results on Application of MEL Data

2. **Regular review and adaptive learning** – Both CKU and Digni partners try to embed quarterly or periodic review workshops to adapt activities and spot unintended outcomes early. The partner organizations adopt adaptive learning practices, relying on regular staff review meetings, transparent communication with partners, and drawing lessons-learned to refine strategies and improve implementation. The survey data shows that 76% of the respondents have adapted their projects based on MEL information, indicating the applied usefulness of the MEL processes (Chart 7). These learnings are shared within project teams, with management, and influence the design of subsequent project phases. Curricula and interventions are adjusted based on group dynamics and contextual realities, ensuring relevance and responsiveness. As one local partner said, *"We change our training content after every reflection meeting with the community."* This clearly shows there are some efforts in adaptation, review and reflection and drawing lessons for future program strategy development, however, the efforts are not always strongly institutionalized, and the reflective culture is yet to be developed conceptually as well as practically.

Monitoring and evaluation were effectively integrated into the project without significant challenges. A structured approach ensured regular oversight and reflection, including quarterly internal catch-up meetings, quarterly progress reports, and comprehensive biannual and final reports. These mechanisms allowed the team to track progress and identify areas for improvement as 'lessons learned'.

- Survey Respondent

3. **Mixed-methods evidence gathering** – It was noted that most partner organizations collect monitoring data using diverse tools and methods, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, storytelling, and observations. Occasionally, outcome harvesting, and participatory group discussions were also used to capture change at personal, group, and institutional levels. Most of the organizations are focused on collecting output level data or documenting occasional case studies of success. Highlighting the importance of capturing stories of change among the target population, one local partner said, *"Numbers are good, but a single story can change how our donors see the work."* The mixed methods of data collection and efforts around triangulation of data enhances the data credibility and helps validate findings through interviews, surveys, and document review to ensure robustness. Drawing on the established principle of data triangulation, one grant holder said, *"If three sources say the same thing, we can be confident it's real change."*

4. **Continuous documentation of stories of change** – Partners maintain rolling databases of case stories for tracking impact and advocacy. The FGD with MEL focal points and other partner/country specific KIIs highlighted that partners employ a range of qualitative methods to capture stories of change and document project success. These include interviews, FGDs, observations, and outcome harvesting techniques to assess behavioral, institutional, and policy-level impacts. For instance, KIIs were used by a regional partner to gather participants' reflections on conferences and project activities, with insights shared through internal reflection sessions and external reports - always with informed consent. In media projects, open-ended questionnaires were used to identify individuals who have experienced change, followed by in-depth interviews to document their personal transformation. One partner said, *"We collect testimonies as they happen, so we don't lose them in the rush."* In one project, outcome harvesting was also used enabling organizations to systematically collect stories of significant change across personal, group, and institutional levels through structured group discussions.

> *In our organization, we used Outcome Harvesting format to collect data from beneficiaries or target groups who are directly affected by, or have experienced, the changes brought about by the project."*
>
> *- MEL FGD Participant*

Interfaith community visits were also used by a local partner to foster dialogue and reduce bias, with changes in attitudes and relationships captured in evaluations and reports. In contexts where public reporting may pose risks, sensitive changes are documented internally for learning and adaptation while safeguarding participant safety. These stories and lessons learned are compiled and shared with teams and sometimes broader audiences, influencing future project design.

Across all approaches, there is a strong emphasis on tailoring documentation methods to local contexts and advocating for donor flexibility to prioritize qualitative insights over purely quantitative indicators. Together, these practices underscore a deep commitment to capturing meaningful, context-specific stories of change across diverse project environments.

8.2. CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR GROWTH

Although many partners and projects have significant strengths in the MEL approaches and systems, there are common challenges that present opportunities to improve MEL across the portfolio. Several of these challenges are related to the specific challenges for FoRB projects due to their sensitivity and difficulty in measuring and managing data. Addressing these can provide practices that advance MEL for FoRB programming more broadly.

1. Capacity and Resourcing:

The challenges faced by many partner organizations in effectively implementing MEL can be largely attributed to their uneven capacity in this field. Smaller organizations and community-based groups, in particular, often lacked dedicated MEL staff, whether full-time or part-time, and program coordinators frequently had to juggle additional responsibilities as MEL focal points. The complexity of reporting formats further compounded the issue, with many partners struggling to submit quality reports. While centralized support platforms (such as DiP at Digni and GrantOne at CKU) are strong data management systems, they are either not accessible for partners (in case of DiP) and need consent of the grant holders (in case of GrantOne), thus, not suitable for sustained data management at local level. None of the local partners mentioned having a systematic locally developed and management data management system that sustains beyond the life of the CKU and Digni portfolio projects.

This gap in MEL capacity-building was underscored in one project's final evaluation, which recommended that project managers should focus on enhancing their results-oriented reporting skills and more effectively monitor and analyze outcomes. The evaluation emphasized the need for a more comprehensive approach to capturing outcomes and impact at structural and cultural level (which is a core component of many FoRB programs), including the establishment of an in-house MEL unit within partner organizations.

Another challenge identified by several partners was the mismatch between short project cycles and the need for cultural and structural shifts. Short project durations, coupled with the sensitive nature of the topics and the qualitative aspects of the desired changes, made it difficult to fully capture and document results. Partners noted that while donor expectations often demand measurable outcomes, the reality is that some significant changes occur gradually or subtly, making them hard to quantify within a limited timeframe. A local partner shared a key insight, stating that certain changes, especially those related to government or religious leaders, may be observed but cannot be publicly reported due to sensitivities and risks. As a result, some of these important learnings are kept internal, limiting the ability to fully document and share such experiences.

> *In our context, there are sensitivities and restrictions - especially when it comes to documenting changes related to government or religious leaders. Sometimes, changes are observed but cannot be publicly reported due to risks, and these learnings are kept internal for strategic reflection and future planning.*
>
> *- MEL FGD Participant*

Furthermore, the review revealed a lack of systematic data management practices among partners. There was no clear reference to structured database systems or data storage mechanisms at local level, and issues related to data privacy and security were not adequately addressed. Most partners focused primarily on collecting output-level data, with occasional success stories or case studies that lacked standardized templates or consistent collection methods. This fragmented approach to data management hindered the ability to effectively capture, store, and analyze information, further complicating the MEL process and impeding the comprehensive understanding of project impacts.

Monitoring FoRB initiatives remains challenging due to sensitivity, resource constraints, and the difficulty of capturing behavioral or attitudinal change. Many partners relied on output tracking without clear links to outcomes, underscoring the need for context-sensitive, qualitative approaches and stronger baseline tools.

Measuring change at outcome level and above is a challenge due to resources but also since it is difficult to specify the change one is expecting to see, and how to practically capture this.

- Survey Respondent

2. Measurement Complexity:

Most of the partners relied heavily on output tracking (e.g., number of events held, participants, materials distributed) without clearly linking these to behavioral or attitudinal changes. Where qualitative methods were used, they were often not integrated into a broader learning or decision-making framework. This was further confirmed by the FGD with MEL focal points who also explicitly identified the challenges of monitoring in FoRB projects, highlighting the sensitivity of the topic, the difficulty in measuring behavioral/attitudinal change, the politicization of religion, government scrutiny, and the ineffectiveness of certain digital tools in some hard-to-reach community settings. These challenges underscore the need for context-sensitive approaches that navigate these complexities.

Further, measuring change at outcome level and above is a challenge due to lack of resources but also since it is difficult to specify the change one is expecting to see and practically capture it. One local partner shared, *"Measuring change, especially behavioral or attitudinal shifts, is difficult without a baseline and in the lack of proper and easy to use monitoring tools at every level of monitoring."* He further added, *"In projects with shorter durations, it can be hard to determine how much change has occurred, as these changes are often qualitative and take time to manifest."* Other partners also mentioned that sometimes, due to the lack of a baseline at the start, they had to rely on secondary evidence and observations over the course of the project to assess change.

One of the common challenges faced by partners is the need to align donor expectations for measurable indicators with the qualitative nature of attitudinal/behavioral change in FoRB projects, particularly when external factors impact implementation, further emphasizes the importance of adapting monitoring strategies to the realities of the project context. There was also a limitation of donor log frames and indicators, especially for media projects, where changes are more about mentality and perception rather than easily quantifiable metrics. A partner said, *"Sometimes important changes are observed but cannot be fully documented or measured in percentages or numbers, particularly in short projects or those focused on attitude and perception"*. Donor requirements and frameworks sometimes fail to align with on-the-ground realities, making it difficult to capture meaningful change. As one participant noted, *"if the donor is really focused on the numbers rather than the actual change - like shifts in attitude or behavior - then it becomes difficult. Sometimes we may not meet the numerical targets, but if we look at the impact in terms of behavioral or attitudinal change, we do see positive results from our project implementation."* The importance of contextualizing indicators and documentation methods to fit local realities and sensitivities was emphasized, as was the need for donor frameworks to allow for capturing nuanced, qualitative changes rather than just quantitative targets.

> *We also noticed that when external expectations pushed for visible results or "success stories" too quickly, it created pressure that sometimes clashed with the community-led, trust-based approach we were trying to uphold. Real change was happening; but it wasn't always linear or easy to measure.*
>
> *- Survey Respondent*

Photo by RnDmS /Shutterstock.com

3. Ethical and Contextual Sensitivity:

The review identified challenges in managing data sensitivity and ensuring participant safety, particularly when working on sensitive topics such as religious freedom or government practices. For example, one partner highlighted; *"Participant consent emerged as a critical component, not only for ethical data collection but also for building trust, when participants emphasized the need to explain project intentions transparently."* Similarly, another partner said, *"The careful use of language was also essential and the need to avoid potentially problematic terms like "religion," opting for alternatives such as "belief" to prevent jeopardizing the safety of participants and their affiliated offices."* Data collection at the community level presented significant challenges, especially with digital tools. Tools like WhatsApp, Google Forms, or QR codes were often ineffective because they could not replicate the nuanced understanding gained through in-person interactions. These tools lacked the group discussions and reflective dialogue necessary to ask deeper questions. Additionally, privacy concerns played a major role, as respondents were often hesitant to provide honest feedback. Despite consent forms and privacy policies being in place, many feared that recorded interviews could be shared publicly, which led to a critical gap between procedural compliance and genuine community trust. This issue was particularly prevalent when documenting sensitive changes, as some issues could not be publicly reported due to potential repercussions. Consequently, certain changes were documented and used only internally for learning and reflection, to protect both participants and organizations.

The consequences of missteps were serious, as one local partner pointed out the potential dangers of publishing data critical of government actions, which could lead to repercussions for both participants and organizations. In such cases, teams would instead keep sensitive findings internal for reflection and strategic planning. The importance of anonymizing data, seeking consent before sharing personal stories or quotes, and working through trusted local networks was consistently stressed, reinforcing the complex but essential balance between ethical research practices and protecting those who participate. Some of the partners also had to navigate significant challenges—particularly security risks - which limited the ability to implement interfaith dialogue activities through media as initially planned. These adaptations reflect the team's responsiveness to both opportunities for deeper engagement and the realities of working in challenging contexts. One of the partners said, *"Project and context monitoring also revealed that some communities were struggling with increased surveillance or pressure from local authorities. To protect participants and ensure their safety, we adjusted locations, scaled down some events, and prioritized relationship-building with local officials to reduce misunderstandings."* Despite facing critical challenges during implementation and monitoring, the partners were navigating through these challenges and documenting results to showcase the success of the project.

4. Structural Limitations:

In many projects, learning loops were inconsistent, particularly in short-cycle projects where time and resources did not allow for adequate reflection, adaptation, or structured feedback. While some partners documented lessons and adapted their approaches in real time, others treated MEL as more of a donor requirement than an ongoing internal learning process. This inconsistency in learning practices hindered the ability to make the necessary adjustments during implementation and reduced the overall effectiveness of the projects.

These challenges were further validated by the desk review of past evaluations across all projects and countries. The evaluations

MEL systems can be strengthened with dedicated tools and analysis for measuring outcome-level changes.

revealed significant weaknesses in outcome-level measurement and attribution, with most projects focusing on output tracking rather than measuring deeper changes in attitudes or behaviors. Outcome claims often lacked supporting evidence, and the quality of the data was generally poor, relying heavily on anecdotal stories and raw data without thorough analysis. This was compounded by weak data collection methods, missing baselines, and the absence of structured monitoring systems. To overcome this weakness in future projects, there should be clear MEL plans that clearly articulate outcome and impact level indicators and corresponding data collection tools as prerequisites in project design.

Organizational constraints, such as limited in-house MEL expertise and reliance on informal learning, further hindered effective evaluation and drawing policy impact. The misalignment between collected data and project indicators, combined with donor-imposed metrics

that did not fit the project goals, further reduced the relevance of the findings. Additionally, certain methodological limitations, particularly in media-based and long-term structural change projects, made it difficult to measure outcomes within the typical project timeframes. It is a prerequisite that relevant program and MEL staff undergo capacity needs assessment and correspondingly tailored capacity building on intervention specific and standardized tools for capturing outcome and impact level data during activity implementation so that high quality and consistent data can be collected and analyzed to speak to results. While developing log frames during design and finalizing the MEL plan during the project inception phase, there should be clarity on what level of changes (among the four level of change: individual, relational, structural and cultural) the project is intended to achieve and how can the project team generate and capture those intended changes depending on the nature and length of the intervention.

9. Recommendations

PROGRAMMATIC

1. **Facilitate sharing of cross-project learning and good practices:** The diversity of programmatic approaches and strategies used across the portfolio provides a unique opportunity for cross-country and regional sharing and learning. Sharing the good practices and organizing cross-project exchange and learning opportunities will allow implementers to learn from each other and localize effective practices in their own contexts. This allows implementers to also feel part of a community of support that recognizes the specific, shared challenges of FoRB programming and the creative approaches different partners use to navigate restrictive political and institutional environments.

2. **Integrate iterative policy and institutional change pathways:** The restricted operating environment and high level of security risks in the contexts of many implementers results in programming focused on individual or local-level change. Working with implementers to identify opportunities for integrating long-term strategies for policy and institutional change in project design will create avenues for linking local outcomes with national-level policy making for more sustainable outcomes.

3. **Increase paths for normalizing FoRB language:** Contextualization of language is an important strategy for working in restricted environments. However, creating strategies for iterative programs that gradually normalize FoRB and human rights language can advance the public understanding and support for universal standards. Although contextualized language is effective for community-level engagement and social norms change, the use of universal human rights standards has a legally binding precedent that is needed to advance FoRB at the structural, policy, and legal levels.

4. **Engage religious majority groups:** The majority of the portfolio's programs focus on engaging religious minorities, both as partners and targeted participants. This is an important strategy for advancing the leadership role of religious minorities in their communities and amplifying their voices. However, engaging religious majority groups is essential for advancing FoRB for all. When majority communities do not recognize the rights of others, structural inequalities and social exclusion persist; therefore, working with these groups helps cultivate an enabling environment where respect for diverse beliefs becomes a shared social norm rather than a minority concern. Therefore, it will be key to finding safe ways to expand engagement to include these groups, both as partners and targeted participants. All engagement, whether with majority or minority groups, should be ultimately determined by implementers' context and risk assessments to ensure it does not present risks to implementers on the ground.

5. **Continue FoRB-focused programs:** Recognizing that key funding for FoRB programming under official development assistance is shrinking globally and donor countries focus on domestic security, there is a risk that FoRB initiatives and local FoRB advocates will lose support, and the progress made under these programs will backslide. Continuing this programmatic focus in CKU and Digni's FoRB portfolios and continuing to coordinate with international FoRB networks to amplify local voices and advocate for sustained funding at donor forums, will therefore be increasingly vital to ensure global programming for FoRB continues and local FoRB advocates are continuously supported.

OPERATIONAL

1. **Continue flexible and adaptive project management:** Although the portfolios' wider grant structure has limited flexibility, local partners relied on the programmatic flexibility that grant holders, CKU, and Digni allowed to be able to adapt their projects. This includes adaptation of timelines, target areas and groups, and activity content to leverage new opportunities and manage risks. A key reason programs have been successful in achieving the outcomes outlined in this report, despite the sensitivity of FoRB programs and the complex contexts for implementation, has been this flexible and adaptive grant management approach of grant holders in both CKU and Digni's portfolios. Continuing this will be crucial as it allows implementers to respond to external political and security factors and ensure safety and security. This can be strengthened by exploring adjustments to the grant mechanisms so that they institutionalize this adaptive management approach.

2. **Engage local partners in multi-year planning:** The funding mechanism for the CKU and Digni FoRB portfolios does facilitate multi-year planning for CKU, Digni, and their grant holders. However, these strategic discussions do not always engage local partners who therefore feel limited by the short timelines for each phase of project implementation. Ensuring that long-term planning, to the extent it is possible within the funding mechanism, includes local partners will allow them to be better informed when managing their time and resources. Where possible, donors can also further extend the timeline for FoRB funding mechanisms to create space for integrating long-term strategies to achieve structural and institutional change for more impactful programming.

3. **Expand local partnership base to engage emerging groups:** Both portfolios have primarily relied on a strong and trusted partnership network. The programming has been transformational for these implementers themselves as well as their communities. Expanding this local partnership base to engage emerging groups will expand the reach of these portfolios, increase the capacity of a larger cross-section of FoRB actors, and expand local FoRB networks. In doing so it must be recognized that these new emerging groups might require additional capacity strengthening than the existing partners.

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MEL AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

1. **Create partner-centric and flexible global intermediate results framework:** To support partners in going beyond output to measuring outcomes, the proposed outcome clusters can be further refined and developed into a set of intermediate results that capture the range of FoRB programs in the portfolio. Tools like Remesh[6] or Pol.is[7] can be used to ensure a participatory validation process with all implementers and ensure partner buy-in for adoption. This would provide partners with a relevant range of intermediate results to report on. The localized indicator tool being developed as part of the learning review process - to co-create community driven indicators of FORB - can then be used to develop recommended global indicators for each outcome cluster that can be contextualized and integrated into project MEL plans.

2. **Develop user-friendly data governance framework and secure shared database:** The learning review as well as past evaluations highlighted the prevalence of fragmented and inconsistent data systems, which needs to be addressed comprehensively. Establishing a collaborative data governance framework for the entire portfolio with clear policies, processes, and standards would ensure consistency and reliability across donors, partners, and systems. Considering the high sensitivity of the data related to FoRB and corresponding safety and security of the project staff and participants, a systematic online data storage and management system at local level with robust security features, and adhering to industry good practices, would also enable local partners to directly input data using two-step password protected security system and would also facilitate aggregation of data in line with an overarching MEL framework at local level as well.

3. **Develop tools for measuring key outcomes:** Many partners shared challenges in relation to measuring social norms change which is a key component of ensuring FoRB. Sharing existing tools and methods, or developing tailored tools, can support implementers in measuring social norms change gradually over multiple phases of projects. Similarly, capturing results (outcomes and impact) of media interventions is challenging for partners. For this, a simple and yet effective 3R (Reach, Resonance/ Relevance, and Response)[8] Framework could be an effective tool to measure the impact of media programs along with social media analytics tools commonly used, depending on the nature of the media projects.

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6 Remesh is an AI-powered platform designed for qualitative research. It allows organizations to hold live, online conversations with hundreds of participants at once. As participants respond to open-ended questions, the platform uses AI to analyze their answers in real time, uncover key themes, and summarize insights.

7 Pol.is is an AI-powered platform that helps large groups of people find common ground, even on complex or controversial topics. Instead of encouraging debates, it uses machine learning to analyze everyone's input, highlight shared opinions, and show how different views relate to each other. Pol.is is open-source and has been used around the world by governments, organizations, and businesses to support better decision-making and public engagement.

4. **Expand the "L" of MEL:** Although applied reflection and learning is seen in many of the projects, learning aspects of project MEL has space for further advancement. For example, learning agendas can be included in projects with longer timelines to document and evidence program learning. Internal platforms and safe spaces for peer-to-peer learning can facilitate sharing and exchange between partners, including local partners. These types of initiatives do have to be resourced to be effective, including dedicated human resources. They also must be targeted, with clear learning agendas as an objective for the engagement to also monitor effectiveness of the platform or community of practice.

5. **Support development of local partner MEL teams:** Providing funding for the dedicated MEL staff and building their capacity for measuring the impact of FoRB projects will be key to actioning the other recommendations to improve MEL in the portfolio. Improving systems for MEL or sharing new measurement tools and frameworks cannot be implemented by partners without the human resources to adapt and apply it to their projects and contexts.

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8 The 3R Framework is a tool used to assess the impact of media projects by focusing on three key dimensions: Reach, Resonance/Relevance, and Response. These elements help measure both the direct outcomes of a project and its broader societal effects, offering a holistic view of its success and influence. Reach measures how widely the media content has spread and whether it has reached the intended audience. It examines the program's visibility within the target society and whether it has effectively engaged the key demographic necessary to achieve its objectives. Resonance/Relevance evaluates how deeply the audience connects with the content or how the content is relevant to the issue in contention. It looks at whether viewers relate to the characters, storyline, and messages, as well as whether the program evokes emotional engagement. Response tracks the societal changes resulting from the media project. This includes whether the target audience takes specific actions based on the content, as well as broader shifts in cultural norms or social behaviors.

This Learning Review will be a useful resource for donors wishing to support initiatives for the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. The report offers a rich and evidence-based analysis of how FoRB programming can foster meaningful change in complex and often restrictive environments. It highlights the transformative impact of locally led initiatives, interfaith collaboration, and inclusive approaches—demonstrating that strategic, context-sensitive investments in FoRB not only advance human rights but also strengthen social cohesion, gender equality, and democratic participation.

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