

Promoting FoRB in fragile contexts: emerging lessons from CREID

This Learning Briefing is intended as a point of reflection and discussion for bilateral and multilateral donors who have an interest in the promotion of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), or at the very least the inclusion of FoRB in a broader agenda of rights and wellbeing. It draws on emerging lessons in promoting FoRB in highly fragile contexts from the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID), a programme established to “provide research evidence and deliver practical projects which aim to redress the impact of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, tackle poverty and exclusion, and promote people’s wellbeing and empowerment”.

The promotion of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) has emerged as an important human right to be protected both internationally and nationally, at a time when the Pew Research 10 year (2007-2017) report *A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World* shows that in 2017, 52 governments imposed “either “high” or “very high” levels of restrictions on religion, up from 40 in 2007. And the number of countries where people are experiencing the highest levels of social hostilities involving religion has risen from 39 to 56 over the course of the study” (Pew Research Center 2019).

In the 21st century alone, FoRB violations have reached the point of genocide in a number of regions around the world. Many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) bilateral and multilateral donors are keen to promote international FoRB in ways that are meaningful and tangible in impact, significant in scale and long-lasting in terms of effect, but the challenges to FoRB promotion internationally are immense.

First, FoRB is ‘fragile’ in the sense that millions quietly suffer on a day-to-day basis from encroachments to this basic human right, whether their religious identity is overtly visible (recognisable by their names or attire), or whether they have to deny their religious identity and beliefs altogether (for example, the Ahmadis in Pakistan or atheists and humanists in many societies where religion has a stronghold).

Upholding FoRB is also fragile in the sense that communities can suffer from a sudden eruption of violence in moments (such as collective assaults on entire communities), with devastating impacts on social cohesion and wellbeing, not to mention lives.

Secondly, the international promotion of FoRB is also fragile in the sense that it is not a cause for which foreign intervention or support is particularly welcome. Many governments consider religious pluralism as a matter of domestic sovereignty, one for which international support is neither solicited nor welcomed. At worst, many governments

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and communities consider the championing of FoRB by international institutions and foreign agencies as driven by their own geostrategic interests, or at best advanced in an incoherent and perhaps hypocritical manner.

FoRB violations are a global phenomenon, experienced across both stable contexts and in conflict-affected ones. However, there are particular challenges associated with OECD (that is, largely Western) support for FoRB in settings characterised by unpredictability in policy environment, ever-changing red lines and volatility in the status quo.

Why this Learning Briefing?

This Learning Briefing shares insights which we hope will help international institutions and foreign agencies (external actors) grappling with the following challenges:

- Navigating the sensitivities surrounding the promotion of FoRB on the ground
- Promoting FoRB in a consistent manner in unpredictable contexts
- Responding to and engaging with faith and non-faith partners with contending legitimacies.

To help address these three challenges, we share three key learning points emerging from the CREID programme so far:

1. Pursue multiple entry points to promote FoRB as part of a broader agenda supporting inclusive politics and society
2. Work in multiple sites within and across countries
3. Work with multiple partners with different repertoires of power in the community.

All three learning points amount to a broader strategy of “a multitude of smalls”. Such a strategy requires constant revisiting in the light of new contingencies as well as a high level of co-ordination.

The learning points are not intended to be prescriptive and for every point elucidated, there will always be exceptions. We are also mindful that in some conflict-affected situations, when there is no security on the ground, these strategies below may be rendered redundant until the situation stabilises.

Multiple entry points for FoRB inclusivity

External actors’ promotion of FoRB has often been closely intertwined with particular entry points.

For example, human rights organisations would often use international conventions and charters as yardsticks around which to engage with advocacy to bring violators in compliance with FoRB, governments

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often promote FoRB externally through policy dialogues, while faith actors offer support for the persecuted belonging to the same faith through assistance and documentation of violations, be they internal or working from the diaspora.

Those engaged in peacebuilding work on the ground have often used interfaith dialogues as the entry point for consensus building around a new social contract.

CREID has placed inclusive community development practices as central to our approach to addressing intersecting inequalities, while using other entry points, like monitoring and countering hate speech.

We recognise that in some contexts, supporting people to come together across faiths is possible, while in others work on interfaith engagement is just not possible.

For example, in Nigeria, the absence of rule of law and basic safety in some parts of the country has meant that while there was a real need for bringing youth together across religious divides to engage in community projects aimed at addressing economic need, it was too dangerous to do so.

While direct community development work was not viable as an entry point, other entry points to addressing FoRB are possible, and while they work with community members, they do not involve putting people's lives at risk.

Box 1 **People gathering their heritage under threat as an entry point for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)**

In many parts of the world, external support for the promotion of FoRB on the ground is not welcome, however, the protection of people's heritage, both in its material form (buildings, archives, etc.) and its intangible/immaterial forms (people's oral histories, festivals, music, social practices, etc.) is an area where foreign support is welcomed.

In contexts where governments do not welcome external actors' support for autonomous civil society organisations' direct engagement with the promotion of FoRB through direct action (advocacy, community development), CREID has worked with local partners to

help communities protect their own immaterial heritage as a pathway for indirect engagement with FoRB.

The benefits for communities suffering from discrimination and prejudice have been many: they have found a safe umbrella under which they can identify, understand, reflect and analyse on their identity, and young people have found ways of delving into intergenerational sources of pain and pride using the latest technology.

Documenting people's oral histories has also given communities an opportunity to unpack sources of social division and cohesion across time.

Work in multiple sites within and across countries

When external actors are supporting local actors on the ground to implement initiatives that promote FoRB, it may seem easier to focus the interventions in one place, if not one country. The transactional costs are higher in terms of:

- **Security assessments:** doing one security assessment for multiple sites is more cumbersome than just one site, especially since risk analysis is an ongoing activity throughout any initiative in a fragile context
- **Management:** planning, implementing and monitoring activities as well as managing staff in several sites is more complex and costly than just one site
- **Resources:** the time, finances and due diligence processes involved in multi-sited interventions far exceeds implementing work in one location.

The above may suggest taking a multi-site approach is neither efficient nor effective and, ultimately, not good value for money, in a context where donors are under a lot of scrutiny by their own governments and civil society. However, when FoRB is being promoted in highly unpredictable and fragile contexts, this approach has several advantages that make this trade-off worthwhile.

Firstly, it recognises that the political situation – and therefore political opportunity – is not uniform in many countries, but varies from one setting to another. This is on account of both encroachments from state and non-state actors alike.

For example, in Pakistan, the possibilities of redressing the inequalities facing religious minorities vary dramatically between one site and another. The situation of Christians and Hindus will also vary according to levels of poverty, class/caste, geographic location and profession. The power dynamics will vary considerably from one community to another.

Box 2 Adaptive management and engagement across multiple sites

In October 2019, protests began in the southern provinces of Iraq where CREID via local partners was undertaking baseline surveys on people's perceptions of religious curriculum reform. These were the areas in which buy-in had been sought from schools to integrate curriculum reform measures, but in response to the unrest schools had been shut and people were unavailable to respond to surveys.

In response to the ongoing protests, local partners moved the survey to

northern Iraq where there were no protests. This presented a challenge as research uptake through schools had not been established in these areas, however fortunately the buy-in of the local educational board was later secured.

As schools were not closed and parents as well as students were available, this provided an excellent opportunity to undertake the survey there instead of at the original sites.

Further, working on a smaller scale and in multiple sites also helps externally supported programmes to work ‘under the radar’ and is less likely than a larger programme with lots of resources to attract negative attention of those hostile to its objectives.

Finally, beyond the contingencies of country-specific variations, the CREID programme has learned that supporting FoRB in multiple sites may enhance the sustainability of the work in a volatile global setting.

Work with multiple partners with different repertoires of power in the community

The success of the promotion of FoRB is as much about who is championing FoRB as it is about the content of interventions. A wide plethora of actors can be well positioned to adopt an integrated approach to the inclusion of FoRB in their work, including the media, arts, culture and of course development and faith-based organisations.

However, there is another important reason why a FoRB promotion strategy should involve working with multiple partners. Society views some issues such as upholding the rights of children or climate change as the remit of entire populations to defend and uphold. However, there are sometimes sensitivities when marginalised religious groups are not given the space to speak for themselves.

On some occasions, those who are suffering from religious persecution are not in a position to advocate for themselves and appreciate efforts on their behalf globally. In other instances (see box 3), members of faith groups facing FoRB violations prefer that the role of external actors be to create platforms for themselves to speak directly, as opposed to having external actors speak on their behalf.

Box 3 Being sensitive to the multivocality of communities facing religious marginalisation

In the Middle East, the cradle of the birth of Christianity, indigenous Christian communities are now facing extinction in countries such as Iraq, Israel/Palestine and Syria. While many Christian communities welcome expressions of solidarity with their plight, they would like the plurality of their voices, experiences and agendas to be heard and recognised. This is important for Western governments who have taken up the cause of the protection of Christianity under threat in the Middle East.

The British government, for example, has expressed a commitment to the implementation of the Bishop of Truro’s report, but when His Grace Archbishop Nicodemus Daoud Sharaf,

the Archbishop of the Syriac Orthodox denomination in Mosul, was asked about his opinion on the Bishop of Truro’s report (House of Lords, 10th July 2020), he expressed his anguish and anger that although the report covers the Christians in Iraq, he was never approached to comment on the situation of the Syriac Orthodox Christian community. He believed that if the report were to make recommendations about how to support the Christians of Iraq, then all denominations should be consulted.

This highlighted to CREID the importance of working with multiple actors and paying attention to the need for multiple representations from within each denomination.

One of the challenges that is very specific to the promotion of FoRB is that, at a local level, there are sometimes particular sensitivities associated with the legitimacy of the person championing FoRB.

In the CREID programme, we have learned to be sensitive to the multivocality of communities which experience intersecting inequalities and to never assume that if they share the same religion, they will share the same denomination or historical experience of marginalisation.

Promoting FoRB through engaging with multiple voices in a community experiencing religious marginality is key to reflecting the diversity within society itself. Across all its projects in all countries, we have found that working with young people in a gender sensitive matter has unleashed creativity, innovation, and momentum in implementing unconventional approaches to promoting FoRB on the ground. This has included online media engagement, dissemination of messages to counter hate speech on social media, and the use of popular people's heritage for positive repertoires of solidarity and inspiration.

The sum of the 'multitudes of small': towards an integrated policy

The idea of multiple entry points, sites and actors may seem disjointed and contrary to thinking around the centrality of scaling up, which aims to enlarge in scope and depth work on the ground:

“No matter how effective a scattering of small-scale initiatives are, the achievement of national and international goals [...] will not be possible without effective large-scale action” (Gillespie 2004:2).

This may be viable in stable contexts, but less so in fragile ones. Scaling up in practical terms comprises an “expansion of scope [which] *deploys new resources to reach new beneficiaries or add new services; replication involves distinct adaptations to reach beneficiaries in new geographical areas; and expansion of geographic coverage involves increasing the existing geography to a wider area*” (USAID dTS 2015:13, italics added).

Chandy and Linn insist on the necessity of scaling up interventions in fragile and conflict affected settings: “Today’s global aid system is overrun with small, fragmented interventions— few of which are replicated, expanded, or even sustained after donor support has been withdrawn. Given their limited scope, the results of these interventions are not commensurate in scale with the problem they are tasked with” (Chandy and Linn 2011:4).

Yet as noted by Wigboldus (2018:37), we need to interrogate evidence for the idea that scaling up bridges the gap between the scale of problems and the implementation of an intervention.

Nowhere is the need to interrogate the logic of scaling up in addressing needs more necessary than in relation to the theme of FoRB and fragile or unpredictable contexts.

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For example, replication is extremely difficult if unpredictability is not taken into account. What was possible in one context may be impossible in another.

Similarly, the expansion of an initiative from a small radius to a wider area may bring local partners into conflict with new authority holders in the new territories who may be hostile to their presence.

Contextual contingencies such as climate change, political unrest, or social hostilities towards FoRB can undermine both diversification of activities as well as their extension to more beneficiaries. If we disentangle the objective (inclusivity) from the strategy (scaling up) we may be able to find a way forward.

The diversification of entry points, space and actors, or the multitude of smalls, may serve the very same purpose of expanding outreach and impact, but without necessarily scaling up in conventional terms.

Instead of expanding the beneficiary base for one existing initiative, a new beneficiary base in a completely different setting may be started up, tailored in order to adapt to its own contextual contingencies. The advantage of maintaining small, tailored contextual interventions is that it allows FoRB-promotion to be agile in the face of new contingencies.

In that sense, in an inadvertent way, the long-term survival of FoRB promoting work as a whole may stand a greater chance of being sustained as it adapts to the ebbs and flows of politics, ideology and contexts. However, for there to be impact, the sum of the different parts must contribute to a greater whole. In that sense, to have a multitude of smalls in terms of partners, sites and themes may create a much richer community of FoRB practice.

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Partners of faith and no-faith engaging in FoRB promotion may share experiences and perspectives which enrich each other

In the CREID programme, creating a safe space for actors to come together from both Iraq and Pakistan was extremely enabling for FoRB promotion. It allowed for:

- a cross-country exchange among FoRB-promoting local partners, who were able to share experiences about how they cope with encroachments from state and non-state actors.
- a sharing of expertise for how to tackle online hate speech, and the creation of solidarities between people who would not have conventionally come together within and across countries.

We felt a sense of belongingness. For me, it was fresh air when I was able to speak up my feelings... This workshop gave me a hope that there were people who still care for humanity and human rights. I knew that many participants... in the workshop were of different beliefs but the way they listened [to] me, understood me and supported me [saying] that Ahmadis must be considered as

part of the society and restrictions [based on] their beliefs do not make any sense was very encouraging. I also learned how other marginalised communities are suffering. [For me], the best part of the workshop [was]... investigat[ing] the real causes and their potential impact on society. (Participant at CREID workshop with feminist activists and scholars from non-majority religions)

These solidarities crossed the boundaries of religion and belief, those working at a policy level and those engaging in grassroots practice, those using FoRB-language and those who engage in alternative framings.

In short, a multitude of smalls led to a unique FoRB community of practice.

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Summary of Learning Points

1. Pursue multiple entry points to promote freedom of religion or belief as part of a broader agenda supporting inclusive politics and society
2. Work in multiple sites within and across countries, and
3. Work with multiple partners with different repertoires of power in the community.

These points amount to the importance of considering a broader strategy of “a multitude of smalls” over a scaling up approach which is less viable in fragile contexts. The advantage of maintaining small, tailored contextual interventions is that it allows ForB promotion to be agile in the face of new contingencies.


Credits

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