

ISSUE BRIEF

Towards youth leadership on freedom of religion or belief



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At a Glance: Youth inclusion, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), and conflict transformation are interconnected; there will be no lasting peace without addressing all three. Conflict and fragile settings are rife with FoRB violations, which act as both drivers and consequences of violence. Though young people are essential actors in these contexts, formal religious institutions and leadership are largely in the hands of older men. Youth are not present in decision-making for a range of reasons including sociocultural and religious norms, perceived or real inexperience, and specific vulnerabilities. At the same time, these challenges and youth's often innovative responses can point us to where targeted action would enable them to thrive, leading communities towards greater peace and respect for freedom of religion or belief. This issue brief outlines the key challenges and opportunities for youth leadership on FoRB.

What is FoRB?

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief (FoRB) is also referred to as religious freedom. It is enshrined in Articles 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

FoRB protects our right to have, hold and change our beliefs. It includes the right to manifest our beliefs and to experience political, civic, economic, social, cultural life free from discrimination.

Connections between young people and FoRB

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) advocates increasingly recognise the importance of working with young people to achieve their goals, as illustrated by inclusion efforts at the 2022 International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in London, UK or the January 2023 International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington D.C., USA. However, these high level events also highlighted some of the challenges institutions experience when they attempt to integrate young people into FoRB decision-making and programming.

The Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda garnered increased global commitment to reposition young people to hold authority and influence over the security decisions that affect their lives. Search for Common Ground (Search), an active player in both the YPS movement and FoRB efforts, sees many lessons learned and best practices in the former that can guide the meaningful inclusion of young people in the latter. Drawing on Search's wealth of experience in both sectors, as well as a [consultative, youth-led webinar](#) on the topic, this issue brief outlines the key challenges and opportunities for youth leadership on FoRB.

Challenges to youth inclusion and leadership on FoRB

Freedom of religion or belief violations occur where distrust and lack of meaningful interaction between groups heighten intra- or interreligious tensions. Societies regularly marginalize people based on age, gender, ethnicity, and religion: a young woman from a minority ethnicity and religion faces multiple layers of discrimination and exclusion. These obstacles complicate FoRB efforts to reach all young people effectively and present themselves in different ways:

- **Formal religious institutions and leadership are largely in the hands of older men.** Due to their influence and defined roles in the religious space, formal religious leaders are the primary actors involved in FoRB activities and decision-making. This is also true for high level commitments or formal platforms such as interreligious roundtables. For example, Muslim leaders from over

120 countries and representatives of marginalized religious communities signed the [2016 Marrakesh Declaration defending the rights of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim countries](#). Although such declarations are significant achievements, lack of inclusion of young people or of actors who hold influence over them [limits their impact](#). Indeed, the exclusion of youth perspectives and concerns, when they form a large part of concerned populations, creates blind spots and gaps in outcomes.

- **Gerontocratic¹ social norms and stereotypes further exclude young people from decision-making processes.** Participants in Search's [webinar on youth and FoRB](#) noted that young people are often labeled as “troublemakers” or “immature.” Values like “respect for one’s elders”, they reported, are instrumentalized to silence youth opinions or prevent challenges to the status quo. Exclusion may also be unintended, especially if decision-makers lack knowledge or practice to meaningfully engage youth.
- **Most young people identify as religious, but [almost half](#) do not trust religious institutions.** If youth do not trust religious authorities, efforts to promote and protect FoRB will be limited – especially in areas where young people form a majority. These young people lose opportunities to acquire crucial skills and knowledge to engage on FoRB, which in turn feeds stereotypes that young people lack the necessary experience to be included. The exclusion further undermines young people’s trust in institutions and leads them to further [detach themselves](#).
- **When youth are included in efforts to improve FoRB, it is primarily through violent extremism-related programs.** Non-state armed groups are common perpetrators of FoRB violations. Due to this intersection, in many places counter-terrorism (CT) and programming to prevent or counter violent extremism (P/CVE) are interconnected. Young people are most commonly targeted by CT and P/CVE interventions because they are perceived to be most [vulnerable to exploitation and radicalization](#). However, limiting FoRB engagement with young people to this context can disillusion young people on the issue. Targeting them primarily as security threats also reduces decision-makers’ ability to see youth as partners. Young people from certain minority groups are especially exposed to this, for example [young Muslim men in Western countries](#).
- **Young people often lack safeguards and support networks that would enable them to work on sensitive issues like FoRB.** The US Commission for Religious Freedom’s [Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) highlights some of the possible repercussions FoRB advocates experience. Young people too face a variety of challenges: legal and financial obstacles, political and sociocultural norms, digital and physical threats. Some of these difficulties are specific to their age; for example, a [UN-commissioned report](#) highlights how working on religious minority rights exposed young people – who are broadly more active online than older peers – to online hate speech, threats, and physical attacks. Protection challenges are also amplified for young people who have had less time to develop networks or knowledge of available resources to support their work.

Defining youth

Although there is no globally agreed definition, “youth” is broadly understood as a transitional phase. Young people’s identity and social role move away from childhood to adulthood. Individually or collectively, youth undergo diverse rites of passage or milestones – cultural, psychosocial, developmental, political or economic – as part of this process. What age range this transition falls within varies according to context and culture. Search for Common Ground (Search) generally defines “youth” or “young people” as individuals aged between 15 and 34.

[At an estimated 2.4 billion](#), young people make up a larger part of the global population than ever before. They are also [40%](#) of people living in conflict or fragile settings worldwide: from Yemen and Ethiopia to the Sahel and Afghanistan, the median age rarely reaches above [25](#). Many young people are also religious – [85%](#) of young adults across 106 countries identify with a religion or practice. In the Middle East and North Africa region, [71%](#) of young adults say that religion is very important to them. In Sub-Saharan Africa, this figure reaches [88%](#).

¹ Gerontocracies are states, societies, or groups where leadership is taken by the elder, to the exclusion of others.

Youth are key actors in achieving enduring peace and FoRB

When communities experience violence, they draw dividing lines based on identity, regardless of the conflict's root causes, and become vulnerable to violations of their freedom of religion or belief. By contrast, countries where FoRB prospers are more likely to protect other civil liberties and [experience lower levels of armed conflict](#). Improved youth inclusion can be the rising tide that raises the standard of FoRB for everyone. Addressing the barriers above requires a focus on building trust and interreligious, intergenerational relationships. The following are key entry points for the FoRB community to partner with young people and create enduring change:

- **Religious youth and their secular peers are at the forefront of efforts for peace and justice, working across a broad range of issues.** The [Youth, Peace and Security agenda](#) has made clear the many peacebuilding roles that youth play – as mediators, community mobilizers, advocates, and peace brokers. Where young people from different or divided religious communities engage in peacebuilding activities, [specific adaptations and best practices](#) highlight ways to enable mutual respect, thus strengthening tolerance and FoRB for all.
- **Young people break cycles of violence through their influence and access to their peers.** Youth are more likely to trust and turn to each other in times of need or uncertainty. Initiatives like the African Union's [iDove](#) or Search's [Inuka!](#) highlight the positive role that young people can play in transforming violent conflict and peacebuilding. Such initiatives recognize youth expertise and knowledge, giving them space to exercise leadership. Similarly, young social media influencers participating in the Sri Lankan [Cyber Guardians](#) project sensitized their peers to hate speech online, sharing the skills they had learnt in boot camps and building networks to counter online hate. Religious youth can also [act as bridges](#) between religious leaders and non-religious young people, helping to build trust and identify shared priorities and actions areas – including on FoRB.
- **Young people are engaged in interfaith youth initiatives.** This includes youth branches of established interreligious organizations such as Religions for Peace, the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, KAICIID, or the G20 Interfaith Forum. All these emphasize youth engagement to achieve global developmental goals. Other organizations' core missions revolve around youth engagement in a religious or interreligious context, such as the Interfaith Youth Core or A Common World Among the Youth (ACWAY). Although not dedicated to FoRB, these platforms address connected issues and create opportunities for young people to engage in decision-making fora. They also signal opportunities to transfer existing youth networks and skills into more explicitly FoRB-focused arenas, breaking down silos. As a result of such efforts, [decision-makers](#) themselves increasingly recognize the crucial role youth play in the promotion and protection of FoRB.
- **Youth take creative and innovative solutions to overcome barriers.** Indirect or innovative approaches help generate appetite and solutions for FoRB in sensitive contexts. In Indonesia for example, [Imparsial](#) connected interreligious tolerance to mental health, and used virtual reality for young people to visit religious and cultural sites. Youth's greater digital literacy and use of social media as organizing tools support more flexible approaches. Although this creates visibility challenges, it points to young people's resourcefulness and determination to have meaningful impact within their communities.
- **Youth movements recognize the importance of intersectionality and holistic approaches.** They are [keenly aware](#) of power dynamics: when youth structures partner with more established organizations to access funding or capacity building support, they often experience a top down, hierarchical relationship that does not meet their need for meaningful inclusion. Young people also recognize additional vulnerabilities that arise due to intersecting identities e.g. gender, religion or belief, geography, background, etc. ACWAY's [charter for peace](#), for example, condemns discrimination on any grounds and calls for the "just representation of marginalized groups". Such inclusive approaches are key to reconnecting FoRB to the broader human rights architecture and ensure its full realization.

Recommendations towards greater youth inclusion and leadership on FoRB

Based on these observations, the following recommendations are for advocates, religious leaders, institutional decision-makers, and donors to further more effective inclusion and leadership of youth on freedom of religion or belief – particularly those living in fragile or conflict areas:

1. Improve the visibility, participation, and leadership of young people in international FoRB decision-making spaces.

- Religious leaders and other FoRB advocates actors should take steps to include young people in organizations, dialogue platforms, and other fora where FoRB is discussed. This should be [meaningful participation](#), and not tokenistic or on the sidelines.
- Policy- and decision-makers at all levels should expand the definition of “religious leader” to recognize informal leadership, expertise, and influence, particularly that of young faith actors, and include them in dialogues and consultations on FoRB.
- Donors should fund youth advocacy on FoRB and improve the representation of young people and their perspectives at international FoRB fora.

2. Promote intergenerational partnership between youth and older actors on freedom of religion or belief.

- FoRB advocates, including religious leaders and youth, should identify opportunities for mentorship and intergenerational collaboration. Young people would develop expertise on FoRB and institutional trust, while being sensitive to religious and sociocultural values.
- Donors and project implementers should emphasize context and conflict sensitive youth inclusion as a foundation for intergenerational FoRB programming.
- Donors should support programs and initiatives that break down intergenerational mistrust. This includes both strengthening young people’s capacities to engage on FoRB, and equipping older faith actors with training or resources on how to meaningfully engage young people.

3. Take a multisectoral approach to freedom of religion or belief, highlighting its connection to other priority areas for youth.

- Donors should support programming that takes intersectional and/or multisectoral approaches to FoRB. Such programs would account for intersecting identities of those affected by FoRB violations, or address FoRB in relation to other relevant issues.
- Religious leaders and CSOs should seek to connect FoRB to other topics relevant to young people, to create opportunities for intergenerational action and increase recognition of FoRB’s importance and interconnectedness with other issues.

4. Invest in specific funding and programming to support youth leadership on freedom of religion or belief.

- Donors should have dedicated funds to support youth-led FoRB initiatives. Such funding should have flexible requirements, making it accessible to both informal and formal youth structures.
- Formal institutions, like CSOs or religious bodies, should find ways to alleviate financial and administrative obstacles for young people to partner on FoRB programming.

5. Ensure appropriate safeguarding policies are in place to protect youth participation.

- Donors and CSOs should respond to the specific vulnerabilities of the young people they work with on FoRB, for example through youth protection policies for FoRB engagement, or youth sensitive context and conflict analyses.