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WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS ACTORS

ASIA RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC FREEDOM (Asia REF)

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Asia REF projects operate in diverse contexts and conditions, yet a common factor is their engagement with religious actors and organizations. Effective engagement with them is vital for promoting religious and ethnic freedom, given their significant presence and influence within communities. Understanding their perspectives, respecting their traditions, and building trust are crucial for fostering meaningful and productive relationships. This guide responds to requests from implementing partners on how to engage with religious actors and offers practical advice in navigating complex landscapes successfully, providing insights that can be contextualized for each project. While implementing recommendations requires time and effort, the investment will yield significant results and long-term networking benefits.

Why engage religious actors?



1

Religious actors, particularly communal religious leaders, hold significant influence. With [85% of the global population identifying with a religious community](#) and religious identification increasing across the board including among youth, according to the [Pew Research Center](#), their impact cannot be overlooked.

2

While religion is not the root cause of most conflicts, many have a religious dimension. Including religious actors in discussions is essential for their resolution enabling them to be a force for peace, rather than a weapon of war.

1

Understand the Religious Context

Mapping the Religious Landscape:

Religious Communities

Identify the religious groupings in your context - both dominant and smaller groups. This helps provide an understanding of the social fabric and key influencers.

Practices and Beliefs

Research local religious customs and beliefs. This allows for more meaningful and respectful interactions and avoids unintentional offenses e.g. Muslim prayer times, Orthodox Christians fast days, indigenous religions' natural holy sites.

Demographics

Examine religious demographics. This provides insights into a community's composition, which helps to tailor engagement strategies.

Understanding Internal Hierarchies:

Sects and Denominations

Learn about different sects and their relationships. This helps to navigate intrareligious dynamics and avoid conflicts e.g. differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims or various Protestant denominations.

Organizational Structures

Understanding the hierarchy within religious organizations is essential for identifying key decision-makers and influencers.

Gender and Age

Understanding the role that gender and age play in each religion supports inclusive gender and youth engagement and the contributions of all community members.

2

Build Trust

Consistent and Sensitive Communication

Listen, and maintain regular communication to build trust and show reliability. This consistency fosters stronger relationships and mutual respect. Show genuine interest in people's perspectives, demonstrating that you value their views and experiences.

Titles

Learn how to formally address the different religious actors, particularly senior leaders, according to their titles.

Respect Boundaries

Avoid pressuring religious actors into actions against their beliefs and convictions, e.g. do not insist on mixed-gender meetings in highly conservative Muslim or Orthodox communities (although you can discuss how the different genders can play a role). Follow through on commitments thus reinforcing your credibility and trustworthiness.

Personal Connections

Build personal relationships in informal settings e.g. over meals. This can strengthen professional collaborations and mutual understanding.

Religious Language

Try to view issues through a religious lens, using language and texts that are comfortable for religious actors. This is important when proposing community reforms.

3

Engage Respectfully

Cultural Sensitivity Respect customs, rituals, and symbols to avoid unintentional offense.

Respectful Language Use terms that show respect and understanding of beliefs.

Honor Sacred Spaces and Times

Acknowledge the significance of religious sites and observe sacred times to show consideration for practices. For example, do not schedule events during Friday Muslim prayers or Sunday services for Christians.



Venues Hold events at venues that religious actors feel comfortable attending.

Religious and Cultural Mores

Recognize that religion and culture are often intertwined. It can be helpful to bring religious actors who are expert in religious texts to discuss the difference between the two in order to encourage cultural shifts.

4

Collaborate Effectively

Partnerships with Faith Based Organizations (FBOs)

Always choose reputable FBOs for effective and credible collaboration.

Religious actors as Champions

Involving religious actors who support your goals as facilitators, trainers, and champions, lends authority to your efforts.

Goal Alignment

Be clear up front about where the common ground lies (e.g., gender equity without promoting LGBTQI+ issues in certain contexts). This can prevent conflicts later on.

Intrareligious, Interreligious and Multi-sectoral Approaches

When carrying out interfaith activities, it is useful to begin with intrareligious engagement to help religious actors feel comfortable and in alignment with their co-religionists. Afterwards move to interreligious engagement and multisectoral collaboration for comprehensive societal impact.

5

Dress and Behavior in Religious Settings

Dress codes and behavior

For religious actors, perceptions of respect are directly linked to how you dress and behave. Modesty, simplicity, and cultural sensitivity are common themes across various religious traditions, e.g. loose clothes that cover the body, covering hair (or removing hair cover for men) removal of footwear at different holy sites. There are many details so do not be afraid to enquire.



6

Practical Event Considerations

Food and Beverage



Ensure food is authorized and respects dietary restrictions, (e.g., halal, kosher). Do not serve alcohol if it conflicts with religious beliefs.

Mixing of Genders



Be inclusive but check in advance if there are customs regarding gender interactions and seating arrangements.

7

Additional Recommendations

Personal Interests.

Religious actors, like all human beings, are guided by interests. Try to find the common interests that can bring diverse actors together, e.g. protection of holy sites or reduction of hate speech.

Capacity Training

Provide training to help religious actors use their influence, shared values, and passion for peacemaking to effectively advance change. Training needs to highlight inclusivity as a value, and advocacy skills.



Risks of Working with Religious Actors

When planning new initiatives it is important to consider, in particular, the following potential risks:

- **Religious and Cultural Mores**

Be mindful of the power dynamics between governments, donors, civil society organizations, and religious actors. Religious actors may be used to further political agendas, which can compromise their neutrality and integrity. Conversely, engagement may empower religious actors to advance their own agendas. It is crucial to navigate these dynamics carefully before, during, and after your activities.

- **Intrareligious and Interreligious Conflicts**

Engaging with different sects or denominations within a religion, or with multiple religions, can exacerbate existing tensions. Be careful how you navigate this terrain.

- **Perceived Bias**

Working closely with certain religious groups can lead to perceptions of favoritism or bias, affecting the broader community's trust. Ensuring balanced engagement with all groups helps mitigate this risk.

- **Extremist Views**

There is a risk of inadvertently supporting or legitimizing religious extremist views. Due diligence in identifying credible partners is essential.

- **Cultural Resistance**

Efforts to promote change are likely to be met with resistance due to deeply ingrained practices. Patience, respect for tradition, and gradual approaches are needed.

- **Security Concerns**

In volatile regions, associations with religious actors can pose security risks to practitioners and participants. Implementing robust security measures is critical.

Useful resources:

[Effective engagement with religious actors](#) – **Asia REF webinar.**

[Six Lenses for Looking at Religion](#) – **by FORB Learning platform.**

[Online Training: Religious Engagement in Peacebuilding](#) – **by USIP.**

[The Common Ground Approach to Religious Engagement](#) – **by Search.**
