

Local Perspectives on Religious Freedom in KYRGYZSTAN



This brief provides program designers, implementers, and evaluators in the Religious and Ethnic Freedom space with practical insights and examples of locally developed indicators using the Grounded Accountability Model (GAM). It outlines the various ways representatives of local organizations and religious minorities perceive religious and ethnic freedom. The subsequent sections provide an action-oriented discussion of the indicators which emerged.

Introduction

The USAID approach to promoting sustainable development prioritizes local ownership, participation, and capacity strengthening. By applying this approach to the Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom (REF) program, the significance of engaging and collaborating with local stakeholders—including religious leaders and communities—in the development of indicators for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) projects is emphasized. The process of localizing indicators aims to honor and recognize local cultural specificities, preferences, and practices; and understand the local context and the complexities of religious practices, beliefs, and dynamics in the region. It can also strengthen the capacity of local actors and institutions to take the lead in promoting FORB, ensure the relevance and effectiveness of projects, and promote sustainability.

In order to determine how local actors and final beneficiaries define “religious freedom”, the Grounded Accountability Model (GAM) was applied. GAM is a participatory research approach that engages community members to define everyday indicators of key concepts, which inform interventions and can be incorporated into monitoring and

evaluation, project activities, and overall design. The data was collected by conducting two focus group discussions with civil society representatives (CSOs) who are working in the field of promoting freedom of religion and representatives of religious minorities groups in Kyrgyzstan. The GAM process generates a list of co-created and localized indicators, and participants voted for the top indicators that resonate most with them.

Limitations: It should be recognized that the data presented below represent the experiences of a limited number of people. Although they are representatives of religious minorities and local actors working in the field of religious freedom, they may not provide a detailed picture of every community in the country. Therefore, each intervention should ideally be preceded by a similar exercise with its beneficiaries. It is important to recognize that when dealing with religious groups, there may be risks of relativism. To avoid this, our team used several approaches. First, it was guided by a human rights and do no harm approach to ensure the results are aligned with these principles. The second was to create a comfortable space for participants. To do so, we invited the religious minority separately and listened to the majority opinion separately, and recognized that there may be representatives of minorities in the majority (e.g. the representatives of the Ahmadi Muslim community were invited to participate in FGD together with religious minority groups). Third, during the discussion we did not touch upon doctrinal theological issues, only experience related to ‘secular’ life. Fourth, cross-check with other existing sources of data to enhance the validity and credibility of findings and mitigate the presence of any biases. In this case, the triangulation of FGD with religious minorities, FGD with CSO working the field, and results of the situational analysis was used.

Country Background

Kyrgyzstan, a landlocked country in Central Asia and a former republic of the USSR, gained independence in 1991. Ethnic Kyrgyz make up the majority of the country's 7 million people, followed by significant minorities of Uzbeks, Russians, Dungans, Uyghurs, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Ukrainians and other smaller ethnic minorities. According to government estimates, approximately 90 percent of the population is Muslim, the vast majority of whom are Sunni. There are also small Shia and Ahmadi Muslim communities. Approximately 7 percent of the population is Christian, including Russian Orthodox and a variety of Protestant denominations. Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, and unaffiliated groups together constitute approximately 3 percent of the population. Adherents of Tengrism, an indigenous religion, estimate there are 50,000 followers in the country. However, these calculate religious affiliation on the basis of ethnicity, which excludes a large number of people who are atheists and those who have converted to other faiths.

Although the constitution complies with international standards on freedom of religion or belief, relevant laws and practices are seen as discriminatory. Violations at the structural level include complicated procedures for registration of religious organizations, government favoritism towards so-called "traditional religions", and non-compliance with the rights and freedoms of believers in the context of countering extremism. Violence, intolerance, and discrimination are most often encountered by so-called 'Kyrgyz proselytes', i.e., ethnic Kyrgyz who have converted to Christianity or other "non-traditional" religions. This is reflected in some instances of direct violence, but more systemic intolerance and discrimination at the local level. Minorities face attacks on property, destruction and desecration of places of worship, religious cemeteries, school bullying, and disconnection from access to water and electricity. However, direct incidents of violence are related to intolerance related to respect for the free choice of religious beliefs and the burial of believers of different religious affiliations in local cemeteries.

Locally developed indicators that emerged as a result of GAM focus groups speak to these realities, while also highlighting the challenges that are unique to religious minorities.

For more information, refer to [Kyrgyzstan's Situational Analysis](#)

Local Understanding of Religious Freedom

Questions for the GAM discussions were constructed in such a way as to understand the various manifestations and understandings of freedom of religion and beliefs, i.e. when a person is alone by him/herself, reads the news or seeks information from the media, interacts with state bodies, relatives, neighbors or the community, desires access to education or work, encounters injustice, and finally, goes to military service or sends a close relative.

Freedom of Religion in Everyday Practice

Participants shared their perspectives on what it means to have the freedom to practice their own religion. Common themes that emerged included the importance of having laws that allow for the practice of religion without discrimination or pressure, feeling safe to express religious beliefs without fear of retribution, and having a sense of security and acceptance from society. It was noted that believers should be able to express religious beliefs without feeling threatened or judged by

others. Participants also mentioned the importance of equal treatment from the government and judiciary in matters of religion. They believe that the state should act as a regulator to prevent extremist tendencies and that certain religious groups should not be allowed to suppress other religious minorities through government intervention.

FORB and Media

Responses from participants regarding media coverage of religious issues and FORB highlighted the importance of media diversity, fair and unbiased coverage, fostering mutual respect, and creating a safe and inclusive environment. Challenges identified included stereotypes, negative attitudes, propaganda, misinformation, and lack of understanding and empathy. Religious minority participants expressed feelings of powerlessness, fear, and disappointment due to negative media coverage, often attributing it to a lack of knowledge and qualification among journalists. They emphasized the need for accurate reporting, fact-checking, and more representation in media coverage to ensure fairness and accuracy. Examples of labeling and negative attitudes towards converts in the media were cited, such as the media focusing on Kyrgyz people who have changed their religion in a negative light, causing feelings of powerlessness and fear, and the term “baptist” being used as a pejorative term in Kyrgyzstan without proper fact-checking before publication.

FORB and State

The responses highlighted the importance of equal access to public services, non-discriminatory treatment, and protection of rights regardless of religious affiliation. However, participants expressed concerns about discriminatory practices, such as denial of registration, inadequate public services, and restrictions on religious attire. Stereotypes and stigmatization were identified as barriers to equal treatment, with instances of biased attitudes and nonverbal favoritism. Issues of inequality were raised, including unequal opportunities for religious organizations and the preference given to certain religious leaders by state officials. While some positive developments were mentioned, such as simplified registration processes, challenges related to the burial of converts and fear of seeking government protection remained. Participants recognized both progress and persistent challenges, with local officials seen as more prone to biased attitudes than higher-level authorities.



Focus Group Discussion on “Religious Coexistence”, GAM Workshop in Kyrgyzstan. Photo by Aizhan Baidavletova

FORB and Community

Responses from religious minority groups regarding their interactions with community, neighbors, and family members revealed a range of reactions based on ethnic background, with stereotypes and cultural allowances influencing perceptions of religious practices. Participants expressed concerns about the lack of platforms for minority voices to be heard and the insufficient cultural efforts to foster acceptance and secularism. Skepticism towards religious groups' charitable initiatives was mentioned, with concerns about ulterior motives and personal gain. The role of teachers in shaping negative attitudes towards different religions was highlighted, as some participants felt that the presentation of religion in schools perpetuated the notion that all Kyrgyz people must be Muslims.

In terms of family and social circles, participants shared experiences of initial rejection, threats, and disownment upon choosing a different religion. However, over time, some relationships improved, and acceptance grew, with family members gradually embracing their religious views. Instances of hiding one's religion to avoid disapproval and the need to flee due to threats were also mentioned, along with ongoing efforts to rebuild relationships with relatives. The experiences highlighted the need for greater societal understanding, acceptance, and the protection of religious minorities' rights within their communities.

FORB and Access to Education and Employment

The discussions on religious freedom and access to education and employment revealed an interesting observation. CSOs were more vocal about the challenges faced by religious majorities, primarily Muslims, addressing issues such as religious attire, prayer accommodations, and biased attitudes from colleagues and superiors. The participants emphasized challenges faced in education, such as wearing religious attire and biased attitudes from school administrators. They stressed the importance of respecting children's rights to education and religious freedom. Recommendations included having tolerant school principals and policies that allow religious attire. The discussions also highlighted challenges faced in the workplace, including finding time and space for prayer and biased attitudes from colleagues and supervisors. The CSOs emphasized the need for inclusive corporate cultures and policies that respect religious diversity, providing resources like prayer rooms, and implementing flexible scheduling during religious holidays.

On the other hand, religious minorities mentioned fewer problems, suggesting a relatively positive experience in accessing education and employment without direct discrimination based on their religious affiliation. Participants mentioned historical barriers to higher education and employment for religious individuals during the Soviet era. However, currently, employers generally do not inquire about religious affiliation during hiring, and religious beliefs do not seem to affect employment opportunities. However, it is important to note that these responses provide a limited overview and may not fully capture the experiences of all religious minorities in this domain. For some cases, the differences between two responses might be due to the Islam requirements to public visible demonstrations (wearing scarfs, praying 5 times, going to the Friday prayer, etc.) that makes it easy to target them. Overall, while both groups recognized the importance of accommodating religious needs, the CSOs focused on addressing biases and creating supportive environments, while religious minorities generally felt their employers were non-discriminatory.

"It is the human factor that makes a big difference; how the heads of the institution treat the issue and how tolerant they are. For example, there were school principals who did not allow a child to wear a headscarf, but another principal was very tolerant and allowed it, and furthermore told off another teacher who forbade a student to attend class while wearing a headscarf. It is important that the rights of children to education and their freedom of religion are not infringed in schools."

-Focus Group Discussion Participant

FORB and Gender

Participants in the discussion highlighted various instances that illustrate the intersection between the right to freedom of religion and gender. These included cases related to girls wearing the hijab facing challenges in accessing education and instances of discrimination against Muslim women in the workplace. Anecdotal evidence was shared, where girls who converted to Christianity were told before marriage that they could believe whatever they wanted, but that after marriage their husband would lead them to the 'true faith.' This implies a gendered dimension to the acceptance of specific religious beliefs. Another participant noted that while the Muslim community generally welcomes converts to Islam, individuals who leave Islam may face condemnation. In conclusion, the participants highlighted varying levels of acceptance and pressure experienced by different religious groups in Kyrgyzstan, with particular emphasis on the potential for double discrimination faced by women.

Overall, the representatives of the civil society and religious minority groups co-created over 110 everyday indicators of religious freedom. These are the **top positive and negative localized indicators**, co-generated, voted, and selected from this discussion:

Civil society representatives shared that they would take the following 10 signals/indicators as signs of religious freedom in their communities:

When religious minority groups can bury their deceased family members in municipal cemeteries nearby their villages.

When religious leaders publish posts about religious coexistence on their social media channels.

When religious organizations can initiate social projects in support of related state programs.

When a higher percentage of people of different religions attend festive events together.

When more religious minorities feel safe seeking help from law enforcement agencies.

When there are fewer children who have dropped out of school for religious reasons.

When there is a higher number of religious leaders making appeals for peaceful coexistence.

When people do not feel judged based on their religious beliefs.

When there are fewer instances of rumors and propaganda against specific religious groups on social media.

When a higher number of children wearing religious attire of their choice can attend schools without restrictions.

Religious minorities shared that they would take the following 11 signals/indicators as signs of religious freedom:

When fewer people from across dividing lines oppose individuals practicing their chosen religion.

When more individuals respect the religious choices of others at all levels.

When more individuals are able to freely express their religious beliefs without fear or reproach, and without subsequent condemnation or persecution.

When more individuals of the titular ethnic group do not face condemnation from society for their religious practices.

When the government's executive and judicial branches take actions guided solely by existing laws.

When more individuals of the titular ethnic group do not face condemnation from the state for their religious practices.

When every individual feels safe regardless of his or her choice of religious practice.

When children in my community are taught to respect members of other religions.

When there are fewer instances of rumors and propaganda against specific religious groups on social media.

When the religious majority does not coerce individuals who have changed their religion to return to their former faith.

When the right to choose one's religion is respected regardless of ethnicity or cultural background.

When charitable and social projects are viewed by society not as manipulative acts, but as social initiatives.

Taken together, these indicators reflect the local Kyrgyz perspectives on the meaning of religious freedom. Locally developed indicators are a great source for guiding actions and promoting accountability to local communities. Stakeholders such as civil society organizations, program developers, policymakers, government agencies and local communities themselves can all act on localized indicators. Although the indicators seem general, they do not only measure the output of a specific action, but also changes in the attitudes and practices of people in communities. For example, when religious minority groups are allowed to bury their deceased family members in municipal cemeteries nearby their villages, it indicates a level of acceptance and recognition of their religious identity and practices. It signifies that the local community and authorities respect their religious choice and provide equal treatment in matters of burial rights.

These indicators not only show existing challenges of religious freedom from the perspective of religious minorities and local actors; they also provide food for thought about possible programmatic interventions in the country. For instance, the same indicator on burial rights in municipal cemeteries suggests that an impactful project design could include: working with the local community to overcome hostility toward religious minorities and sensitize them on the importance of burial rights for everyone, or working with local authorities to allocate appropriate land, or integrating this issue in local early warning mechanism, or working with law enforcement and judicial authorities to ensure access to justice in case of community violence related to the issue.