

Local Perspectives on Religious Freedom in SRI LANKA



This brief provides program designers, implementers and evaluators in the Religious and Ethnic Freedom space with practical insights and examples of locally developed indicators, aligned with 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 that 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 also can 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”, Search facilitated a participatory process that engages community members to generate local indicators based on their everyday experiences of the concept, aligned with the Grounded Accountability Model (GAM). GAM is a participatory

research approach designed to inform interventions and drive greater accountability to the communities served by those interventions, and can be incorporated into monitoring and evaluation, project activities, and overall design. Search collected the data by conducting a workshop with civil society members, minority religious groups, and majority religious groups in Sri Lanka. The process generated a list of co-created and localized indicators, and participants voted for the top indicators that resonated 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, we were 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. Third, during the discussion we did not touch upon doctrinal theological issues, only experience related to ‘secular’ life. Fourth, we cross-checked with other existing sources of data to enhance the validity and credibility of findings and mitigate the presence of any biases. In this case, triangulation of literature review, FGD with religious minorities and the workshop with CSOs working the field were used.

Country Background

Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, is an island nation in the Indian Ocean. Among the principal ethnic groups, language and religion determine identity. With a total population of 23 million, Sri Lanka has the largest Sinhala population (74%). Tamils (11.2%) are the second major ethnic group on the island, and Moors comprise just over nine percent. There are also small ethnic groups such as the Burghers, Malays, and Vedda people. Spoken languages are Sinhala (the official and national language), Tamil (a national language) and about ten percent of the population speaks English as a second language. More than 90 percent of the Sinhalese are Buddhists (70%), and both Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils are overwhelmingly Hindu (12.6%). Sizable minorities of both Sinhalese and Tamils are Christians (7.4%), most of whom are Roman Catholic. Muslims (9.7%) are legally recognized as a separate ethnoreligious group.

The country has a legal framework that guarantees religious freedom but accords Buddhism a “foremost place” in the constitution. Sri Lanka has a history of ethnic and religious violence, including the civil war between the Sinhalese and Tamil populations that lasted from 1983 to 2009. Acts of terrorism, such as the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019, have targeted religious minorities. The government has faced criticism for its handling of religious freedom, including blasphemy laws and restrictions on expression. Counter-terrorism measures have been implemented, but concerns have been raised about due process and the targeting of minority communities. Violations of religious freedom, arbitrary detention, and torture have been reported, particularly against Muslims and Tamils.

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 [Sri Lanka’s Situational Analysis](#)

Local Understanding of Religious Freedom

FORB and State

Participants from the CSOs, minority religious group, and majority religious group agreed that the politicization of religion has contributed to divisions and conflicts between religious communities in Sri Lanka. There was also broad agreement that the Constitution should not give special status or priority to Buddhism over other religions in order to uphold principles of equality.

However, CSO participants focused more on infringements of religious freedom, lack of awareness about minority faiths, and exclusionary rights granted to Buddhist clergy. Those in the minority religious groups emphasized the need for equal constitutional treatment of all religions to ensure freedom of belief. Meanwhile, the majority religious perspective acknowledged their privileged status has enabled abuse of power by Buddhist clergy but saw politicians as primarily responsible for dividing communities along religious lines.

FORB and Language

According to participants, particularly those in the minority religious groups and CSOs, language rights are closely tied to religious freedom and peace in Sri Lanka, where language is intertwined with ethnicity and religious identity. Ensuring public services and spaces are accessible in Tamil promotes inclusivity and respect for diversity. However, linguistic marginalization of minority groups has been an ongoing historical challenge. While government measures to provide trilingual services have improved accessibility, participants believe more work is needed to ensure Tamil speakers can fully access justice and public services in order for religious minorities to feel equally included in society and exercise their fundamental rights. The ability to submit police complaints or access government circulars in one's language demonstrates progress but also highlights the importance of language accessibility for religious freedom and peaceful coexistence.

FORB in Community

The minority religious perspective expressed concerns about discrimination, unequal treatment, and preferential treatment for the majority faith in public spaces, underscoring issues of identity, power dynamics, and social hierarchies. Relatedly, the majority religious group acknowledged racism and the damaging majority-minority mindset. CSO participants emphasized the positive aspects of societal harmony and the aspiration for inclusivity, noting that cross-community support during crises showcased how humanity often transcends racial and ethnic barriers. The need for accommodating religious practices, like allowing Muslim students to pray without restrictions, spoke to the value of religious freedom and tolerance. They also discussed the celebration of diversity through joint festivities and highlighted the aspiration for reconciliation, as exemplified by the efforts between Tamil and Sinhala Nuns of the "Holy Family Sisters" to heal the wounds of the civil war.



FORB and Education

The CSO discussion focused heavily on concerns about discrimination in school admissions and curriculum based on religion. There was a desire for inclusive education teaching about all religions equally, rather than forcing students to study their parents' religion. They felt religious education should be separate to prevent undue influence. While recognizing the value of teaching about religious festivals, they also noted the tension with school holidays. Instances of admission discrimination and the impact of societal violence on children's wellbeing were raised. Overall, the emphasis was on reducing discrimination, fostering understanding across religions, and minimizing coercion in religious education.

Both minority and majority groups desired education about all religions, rather than just their own, to promote understanding, empathy, harmony and protect religious freedom. They were concerned about mandatory religious education aligned to parents' religion, seeing it as unnecessary coercion limiting critical thinking. However, some saw value in religion teaching morals. Despite differences, both minority and majority groups shared the goal of inclusive education and exposure to diverse religions to reduce misconceptions and bias. Their perspectives recognize the complexity of balancing religious practices with principles of equality in Sri Lanka's education system.

FORB and Media

The CSOs discussed how mainstream media in Sri Lanka often promotes divisive political agendas that create religious divides. Participants highlighted the media's problematic role during crises like the Easter attacks, fueling anti-Muslim sentiments and discrimination. Both minority and majority groups emphasized the urgent need to address hate speech and misinformation online to maintain peace and protect religious freedom. Minorities felt compelled to self-censor their own speech due to the dangerous weaponization of religion and ethnicity on social media platforms. They worried about facing discrimination or violence if they expressed their opinions and beliefs openly. Majority voices similarly stressed how highlighting religious identity in reporting can entrench divisions between communities over the long-term.

Participants also agreed that social media has immense capacity to either unite people across divides or tear communities apart. However, minorities focused more on the importance of preventing the circulation of divisive, dangerous content in the first place, while the majority prioritized regulating and removing it after the fact. Overall, all perspectives underscored that countering the spread of religious divides and disinformation online through proactive means is crucial for harmony, inclusion and the ability to freely express religious beliefs in Sri Lanka's diverse society.

Indicators

Overall, the representatives of the civil society and religious minority groups co-created 130 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 the school curricula include teaching about various religions in the country to promote interreligious harmony and collaboration.

When there is a sense of equality among all religious and ethnic groups before the law and in practice, especially by the state authorities.

When people feel that they are living with a sense of dignity, regardless of their ethnic and/or religious identity.

When Article 3 of the Sri Lankan Constitution will be revised to provide equal importance and legal rights to all religions.

When people have the full ability to follow the religion of choice without any restrictions and let others follow their religion of choice.

When Sinhala and Tamil languages are both taught in all schools without exception, and people are able to communicate directly.

When people are able to create space for conversation without fear and insecurity.

When the government effectively implements the existing National Trilingual Policy to provide equal treatment of all languages of practice.

When people start to learn each other's language to enhance their ability to communicate with "others".

When community members collaborate regardless of their individual identity.

Religious minorities shared that they would take the following 10 signals/indicators as signs of religious freedom:

When people feel that they can send their daughters to school in the morning and feel confident that she will come back home in the afternoon safe and sound.

When I speak in Tamil on public transport, people will turn and look at me and know what I am talking about.

When minorities like Muslims are allowed to buy a house in any part of the country without any legal restrictions.

When people can submit their complaints in Tamil language at a police station, regardless of which Province or district it is.

When minority families living in rented houses in the Dehiwala area do not live in fear when elections come and racism happens.

When schools have a formal curriculum to teach children about all religions and their religious rituals.

When all government circulars are published in all three languages.

When a Muslim or Tamil child admitted to a Sinhala-medium school is not discriminated at the point of admission.

When people stop using social media or other public platforms to circulate hate speech and incite violence against individuals or groups for their opinion or thoughts.

When people start to respect each other's differences and participate in festivals and rituals without any prejudice.

Religious majorities shared that they would take the following 10 signals/indicators as signs of religious freedom:

When teachers are guided through a school curriculum designed to work with children to change their ideology around social harmony and shared identity from preschool.

When minority families living in the rented houses in the Dehiwala area do not live in fear when elections come and racism happens.

When political manipulation of ethnicity and religion for their political and personal gain stops.

When there is no feeling among the population that we have a majority and a minority in our country.

When social media is regulated to filter out hate speech, misinformation and racism using a code of conduct.

When the media do not sensationalize news of crime or atrocity perpetrated by an individual by linking it to the entire community and identity

When there is a sense of joy that a wife or child and family members exhibit in everyday life.

When there is internal peace in one's mind and heart through social enlightenment and spiritual practices.

When children are not separated based on their ethnicity or religion, like Sinhala school, Tamil school, and Muslim School.

When religious leaders work together to play a larger positive role in society to unite our community across diversity.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Taken together, these indicators reflect the local Sri Lankan 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. While these indicators may appear broad, they not only measure specific outcomes but also capture shifts in people's attitudes and practices within communities. For instance, when public services and documents are accessible in Tamil, it shows authorities accommodate and respect the needs of Tamil-speaking minority groups. This signifies progress in linguistic inclusion and equal access to public goods and information, regardless of ethnicity or religion.

These indicators not only reveal the existing challenges related to religious freedom, but they also offer insight into potential programmatic interventions in the Sri Lankan context. For instance, the indicators show how provisions in the constitution that privilege Buddhism create inequality between majority and minority religions. They also demonstrate how politicians and the media exploit religious divisions, sowing further discord between communities. These mean that there could be a variety of program interventions, including:

- Incorporate comprehensive religious education within school curriculums, starting from early childhood, that teaches the core tenets and values of diverse religions. This promotes understanding and harmony.
- Ensure the school curriculum accommodates both Sinhala and Tamil languages alongside English to facilitate communication and integration.
- Initiate interfaith programs that bring together students and leaders from different religious backgrounds to build relationships and understanding.
- Reform religious education to emphasize shared values and positive messages, fostering equality and mutual respect.
- Advocate for constitutional amendments that guarantee equal rights and representation for all religious groups, ensuring an impartial legal framework.
- Provide training for government officials on religious pluralism and ensure equitable services for all communities in their languages.
- Implement stronger regulations on social media and advocate for ethical conduct in mainstream media to curb biased narratives that sow discord.
- Advocate against discrimination in housing, land purchase, and school admissions based on religious identity.
- Reintegrate former militants into society through rehabilitation programs, deterring their involvement in criminal activities.
- Uphold clear separation between religious matters and state governance to ensure impartiality.

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