# Search for Common Ground

**Trust, Collaboration, Breakthroughs**

# Promoting awareness of the legal framework of religious freedom

*lessons learned from community activities in Kyrgyzstan*

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## Introduction

In 2022-23, Search for Common Ground (Search) undertook a 22-month project to enhance the rule of law framework concerning religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan. One of the three project objectives was to increase awareness of the legal framework around religious freedom in local communities, with a particular focus on women's rights and interfaith dialogue. Based on the findings of a barrier analysis, the project team identified 13 locations where the project activities would take place, in addition to seven oblast centres.

This document presents the results of a lessons-learned study focusing on the second objective - promoting awareness of the legal framework around religious freedom in local communities. Through a review of project documents and interviews with the project team and speakers, the paper seeks to answer three questions: what strategies helped make the project more effective, what were the main challenges encountered, and what recommendations could be made for similar projects in the future?

The findings include eight aspects of the project that helped make it more successful and thus could be listed as "best practices":
- Pathbreaking design: advancing women's rights through freedom of religion
- Approach matters: searching for a common ground
- Women-only events are key for women to speak up
- Close collaboration with the national partner
- The team matters: respectful and respected speakers
- Targeting opinion-makers
- Setting the focus right: barrier analysis
- Setting the context right: the role of the core project team

The study also revealed four challenges that the project team encountered, including a) insecurity of religious minorities that limited their participation, b) the biased approach of the SCRA, c) an overloaded schedule of project activities, and d) the limited depth of project intervention.

The report concludes the "lessons learned" with four recommendations that similar projects could take aboard in the future. First, such projects will benefit from further **strengthening of partnerships and investing in partner organisations**. Second, the discussion of the rule of law with religious leaders and activists will benefit from more hands-on involvement of **local government representatives**. Third, the project's impact will benefit from setting up a **well-designed knowledge accumulation and sharing platform.** Finally, the discussions and exercises during the project activities provide the best opportunities to understand and plan further actions towards the grand purpose of the project.

## The country context and project design

Since the early 1990s, Kyrgyzstan has been known for its relatively more open political system and a greater space for human rights and freedoms. Together with advancements in freedom of expression, political competition and civil society development, the country featured relatively liberal policies on freedom of religion in Central Asia. However, several processes in the past decade or so exposed the fragility of the freedom of faith and the contours of significant challenges in this respect.

One was the rise to prominence of the religion-extremism nexus, especially after 9/11. Religion became a securitised subject, compromising the government's commitment to respecting freedom of religion. Following the relatively liberal 1990s, the government grew increasingly proactive in asserting its role in religious affairs and distinguishing traditional faiths from non-traditional.[1] Second, recent years have seen a considerable increase in the population's religiosity. Referring to the growing number of religious institutions, observers wrote about "an unprecedented growth of the role of religion in the life of society" in the country.[2] The process featured both the deepening (people growing visibly more pious than in the past) and widening (increasing diversity of religious movements) of religion's role in social life. These two processes, combined, contributed to the emergence of different groups with greater vulnerability in practising their religion, with religious minorities and women being the two most prominent ones.

Search's project addresses the core issue: the weak coherence between the rule of law and religious freedom. To address the problem, the project advanced three objectives:
- Help judicial and legal actors shift their practice in religion-related cases to mainstream gender sensitivity and standards of religious freedom;
- Increase awareness of the legal framework around religious freedom in local communities, with a particular focus on women's groups and religious minorities;
- Strengthen dialogue and collaboration between state and non-state actors in furthering the legal framework around religious freedom.

The first and the third objectives were built on primarily top-down activities, with the main stakeholders based in the capital city, Bishkek. In contrast, the second objective envisaged a **bottom-up process**, with the intervention engaging directly with local community members throughout the country. It is this component that the present report focuses on.
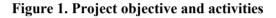
The second dimension of the project - activities at the level of local communities - is **central** to ensuring the long-term impact of the intervention for two related reasons. First, national legislation and high-level policy decisions are not isolated from, but, on

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[1] See Engvall, Johan. "Religion and the Secular State in Kyrgyzstan." Silk Road Paper. Central Asia - Caucasus Institute, June 2020. https://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13371-religion-and-the-secular-state-in-kyrgyzstan.html.

[2] Usenov, Arsen. "Religious Politics in Kyrgyzstan: Analysis of Achievements and Issues." Cabar.Asia, July 18, 2022. https://cabar.asia/en/religious-politics-in-kyrgyzstan-analysis-of-achievements-and-issues.

the contrary, are meant to directly reflect the views and values of people on the ground. Second, it is at the level of local communities where we most clearly observe the interaction between the laws and rules and daily practices. Such interaction may oscillate between coherence or contradiction, with vulnerable groups such as religious minorities or women being potential victims.

Search and its partner organisations adopted a three-folded approach to pursue the objective (see Figure 1). A total of 56 events were planned, including 14 information-discussion meetings, 14 round tables with religious authorities and activists, and 28 women's circles. The women's circles and information-discussion meetings took place in 13 target areas, while round tables were organised in the seven oblast capitals in two rounds.

**Figure 1. Project objective and activities**



**Information-discussion meetings** were full-day events, with the first part dedicated to a set of presentations and the second part reserved for discussion and group work. The presentations covered three topics:
- A. review of the religious situation in the oblast (region), delivered by the representative of SCRA,
- B. constitutional norms on human rights to freedom of conscience and religion in Kyrgyzstan, by an invited speaker, and
- C. gender equality at the local level, by an invited speaker.

The discussion part focused on existing approaches to addressing problems with FoRB and recommendations for the more effective safeguarding of freedom of religion at the local level.

**Round tables**, held twice in each oblast capital, brought together the leaders of different religious organisations to discuss the state policy on religion, gender equality and interfaith dialogue. The second round of events focused on participants seeking solutions to common problems and the establishment of Interfaith Councils at the regional level. Most prominent topics of discussion included domestic violence, issues with unregistered religious facilities, parents refusing to send kids to schools for religious reasons, burial issues and wearing of religious clothes.

**Women's circles** were women-only events, bringing together representatives of various religious communities, representatives of local authorities and community activists. The events covered the legal framework on religious affairs, women's rights and gender equality. As project documents suggest, the discussions revealed unmet demands for legal information and information on economic and educational opportunities, psychological services and trauma-informed care.

The principal implementing partner, the Center for Religious Studies (CRS), carried out the project activities. CRS is an independent research institute with extensive experience in monitoring the religious situation in the country, conducting public opinion surveys on religious issues and studying interfaith and state-religion relations. CRS and Search also closely worked with the State Commission on Religious Affairs under the President of Kyrgyzstan (SCRA), the primary government institute overseeing the state's religious policy. The SCRA offices in regional capitals were instrumental in recruiting the participants for the workshop and contributing to the discussions substantively.

## Promising practices: what has worked well?

Raising such complex and sensitive topics as the relations between religious majority and minorities or the **role of gender relations in religion** is a difficult task. It is especially so in countries such as Kyrgyzstan, **where influential religious narratives** routinely question the very relevance of the state and its institutions. The complexity of the task, at the same time, is what inspires the project teams to come up with well-planned approaches and innovative adjustments. Below are eight elements of the project implementation that could be called "best practices". Not only were they critical to the project's success, but they will also likely be mandatory elements of similar interventions in the future.

### Pathbreaking design: advancing women's rights *through* freedom of religion

The project's idea of placing gender equality in the context of freedom of religion was pioneering and a bold and pathbreaking endeavour. In light of growing challenges in defending women's rights among secular groups in Kyrgyzstan, many "do not dare to raise gender issues with religious groups," an expert says. Such reluctance may reflect assumptions about religious people being more conservative, making discussion futile or potentially conflict-generating. However, the respondents pointed to at least three reasons why it is important and necessary to raise gender equality with religious leaders.

First, such a step acknowledges how gender issues and religion are deeply intertwined with local cultural context and daily practices. The role of religion is too significant to have it "bracketed" in the discussion of gender equality and vice-versa. The project activities focused not only on violations of women's rights in the name of religion but also on challenges women face in practising religion due to being overloaded with household chores. Second, religious communities make a vast and coherent network, making it a critical factor in spreading norms and values upholding gender equality. Finally, the project activities have already demonstrated the benefits of such an approach. Respondents cited one imam (a participant in the project events) devoting the Friday khutbah to domestic violence and protecting women's rights. Thus, while discussing women's rights with religious leaders can be daunting, gender mainstreaming is essential to effectively reconcile freedom of religion and the rule of law.

### Approach matters: searching for a common ground

Bringing together groups that rarely meet and talk is an inherently challenging task, especially on sensitive topics such as identity, religious norms, cultural values and related topics. Strong opinions on specific topics or presuppositions of groups against each other often hamper constructive communication. Acknowledging the delicate nature of actors and issues and staying true to the mission of Search, the project team firmly focused on identifying and building on themes of common concern.

The task of searching for common ground is never easy. On several occasions, discussion participants **exhibited strongly-held sexist views**, especially when discussing **gender-related roles and gender-based violence**. By far, the most challenging subject remains the issue of burial. Religious minorities, such as Baptists, have long suffered **pressure from the majority religion** (Muslim mainly, but also Orthodox Christian in urban settings) to bury the person's remains outside the local cemetery. The project's strong focus on the rule of law as a foundation, **rather than opposition to religious practices**, has helped find common ground on most topics.

The above stems from the **strategic communication approach** that prioritised focusing on individuals' and communities' specific needs and concerns rather than debating worldviews or beliefs. As one of the speakers said, **there would be little chance for a constructive debate if gender equality was discussed exclusively based on religious writings or philosophical viewpoints**. In contrast, the discussion of early marriages, infant mortality or domestic abuse can be firmly rooted in robust statistics and specific legislation, international and national. Such an approach provided a compelling entry point to engage religious leaders and activists in discussing women's rights.

Searching for common ground through **art therapy** was another effective instrument.[3] The meetings of women's circles had a difficult beginning. As one speaker said, "at first, women from different religious denominations seemed uneasy as if expecting others to start persuading them on religious matters". However, through an art therapy exercise, women were able to overcome alertness to identify and discuss important issues of common concern, whether water supply issues, women's health concerns, the state of local infrastructure and so on. The exercise involved women expressing their concerns, expectations and dreams in writing and painting, and, as a result, producing a mosaically designed "solidarity scarf" that captured the discussed issues. Some participants of women's circles agreed to talk on camera about the activities and even took the crew to their home, a clear sign of trust in the project.

The experts leveraged trauma-informed competence to prioritise the creation of space for the female participants and accommodate their communication preferences. Entrenched cultural and religious norms prevent women from freely expressing and discussing personal concerns and grievances. In many cases, women struggled to acknowledge how their rights were violated and what were possible ways to improve their state. However, revealing and discussing rights violations can risk "investing" in women's grievances unless they see ways to address the problems. Based on this assumption, the team focused on strengthening women's self-confidence and proactiveness and helping them unite into groups to collaborate on the most pressing concerns.

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[3] Carolan, Richard and Hill, Amy, "Art Therapy and Neuropsychology" (33-47) *and* Harrison, Jennifer, "Art Therapy and Social Change" (124-133), published in: Carolan, R., & Backos, A. (Eds.). (2017). *Emerging Perspectives in Art Therapy: Trends, Movements, and Developments* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.4324/9781315624310; Dilawari, K., & Tripathi, N. (2014). "Art Therapy: A Creative and Expressive Process." *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology,* 5(1), 81-85. Retrieved from http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/art-therapy-creative-expressive-process/docview/1614312498/se-2

Overall, having "inconvenient" topics is not a problem. Quite the contrary, **disagreements and debates are indicators of healthy interest and engagement**. As one speaker emphasised, religious people with evidently strong views are, in fact, very open to new information. "Curiously, compared to politicians or secular radicals, many religious people absorb information and are open **to change their views** in the face of a compelling argument," one respondent says. Therefore, while the topics may be sensitive and debates seemingly futile, in reality, searching for common ground in such a context is a task not only desirable but also realistic.

### Women-only events are key for women to speak up

The project activities revealed the unmet needs of religious women in information, networks and experience sharing. However, this only became obvious in women's circles. As one of the speakers highlighted, women representatives of *kaziyat* or *khatibiyat* (oblast and district level units of the Muftiyat, the central Muslim community organisation) were, as a rule, very passive in the meetings. Such behaviour may stem from their integration into specific power hierarchies. After some carefully moderated discussion, it was only in a women-only format that the project team revealed the acute information needs of women on various topics, from women's health issues to educational opportunities to contact details crisis centres and psychological support centres. The takeaway, thus, is to more actively involve women in such projects, including via women-only formats.

### Close collaboration with the national partner

The project design had a built-in role for the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA), which was one of the critical elements for the project's success. In Kyrgyzstan, there is no shortage of projects that ignore or at least give a limited role to the relevant state agencies. While this may be a marginal issue for some projects, for others, the failure to engage a relevant state institution may seriously jeopardise the project's effectiveness. Both Search and the CRS have a track record of cooperating with the SCRA, and they effectively built on it when designing the present project.

Close collaboration with the SCRA ensured at least three benefits. First, having the active engagement of the relevant state agency was critical to convey the message that the Constitution and the laws uphold the freedom of religion. Second, the involvement of the SCRA made sure that the project activities, often in remote rural areas, received the due attention of key community actors at the local level. Thus, the project events attracted representatives of local governments, key religious figures of the locality and other influential actors, such as representatives of the courts of aksakals. Third, in the context of growing alienation between the state and civil society organisations in the country, the SCRA's involvement helped reassure the participants about the genuine openness of the government to the project. That said, the project activities also revealed some flaws in SCRA's understanding of its role, as discussed in the sections below.

### The team matters: respectful and respected speakers

A solid team of speakers for the local events was a crucial advantage of the project. As several project staff members highlighted, the topics that the project events raised and discussed often come from the category of debated and divisive. Strong opinions abound, for instance, on the question of "proper" gender relations in the context of rural Kyrgyzstan or ways to build ties between religious minorities and the majority. Controlling the discussion to prevent the dominance of the few outspoken or elderly participants required speakers that were respectful and commanded respect.

The main experts of the project, covering topics of the legal framework of the freedom of religion and gender relations, had extensive experience in respective subjects and had personalities well suited to manage debates. As one of the project team members emphasised, there were times when some audience members strongly insisted on their views that contradicted the speakers, and a slightly less delicate approach could quickly turn the whole process around. What matters is not only the domain knowledge of the person but also the ability to remain composed during heated discussions and demonstrate openness and respect for others' views throughout the discussion.

Separately, the project bringing teams of 2-3 speakers, supported by a moderator, proved effective. Experts covered distinct thematic areas (such as legal aspects of freedom of religion, gender relations etc.), but the events were designed to encourage them to work coherently as a team. Several respondents concurred that such a format was essential to ensure effective and productive discussion.

### Targeting opinion-makers

Strategic selection of primary beneficiaries is vital to spreading the project's impact. Participants of round tables and discussion meetings included some influential opinion makers of the locality, whether an imam at the local mosque, a madrasa teacher or a leader of a women's organisation. As one respondent said, these are people whose public outreach is hard to overestimate. While they may not routinely gather large crowds (which mosque imams, in fact, do), most participants tend to be active members of various small groups, including some with social media presence. "Recently, I saw a young imam speak about the importance of the state, which is rarely heard in the context of informal conversations about religion," says one respondent, adding that this is precisely the impact this and similar projects seek to create.

The above is an important project design decision given the limited number of activities that the project carried out. Often similar projects exhibit a "bottle-neck" problem when a small size of project beneficiaries inhibits the scale of the impact. This is an important challenge for interventions that aim at feeding into broader societal changes. Search and CRS, in collaboration with SCRA, addressed this problem by targeting local actors who are respected locally and have daily access to a wide range of community members.

### Learning and adjusting to the context

Notably, the project team invested in assessing the situation on the ground and remained committed to learning and adjusting to the changing context. Despite a relatively short project duration, Search and CRS commissioned a barrier analysis. The study, conducted by an external research team, aimed to assess the barriers to realising the right to freedom of religion for women and religious minorities. Such a study helps maximise the relevance and effectiveness of the intervention, two of the OECD DAC criteria. In particular, the barrier analysis provided a comprehensive mapping of key themes based on data from over 200 respondents. Even though Search or CRS have ample experience and expertise on the subject, a dedicated study was crucial to tailor the format and themes of the intervention. The findings from the research fed both the selection of target areas and decisions on the thematic focus of the project activities, whether in women's circles, religious round tables or discussion meetings.

The project team also conducted a mid-term evaluation to assess progress, identify issues and propose recommendations to fine-tune further activities. In addition, the project team calibrated their understanding of the context after each activity, further integrating findings into the subsequent project actions.

### Setting the context right: the role of the core project team

The final "best practice" concerns the role of the core project team, representatives of Search. The organisation was responsible for the overall project design and implementation, while the implementing partner (CRS) and recruited speakers were primarily responsible for conducting the activities. Yet, the respondents of this study stressed the value of having project coordinators from Search in the project activities.

A brief intervention from the Search staff explained the purpose of the entire project and specific activities. One of the speakers stressed the importance of such aspects in setting the correct tone for the whole event, as the participants now knew the answer to the big "why" question. The presence of the core project team also helped elevate the status of the project activities. Having experts on a subject is excellent, but it is only effective when the audience understands the purpose behind the discussion and activities. Thus, even when the Search team was present for monitoring purposes, the project benefited greatly from their substantive contribution.

## What has not worked well: challenges and limitations

Identifying aspects of the project that did not go well, or not as well as expected, is an essential part of the "lessons learned" study. This part of the study reveals challenges that the project encountered, whether stemming from the project design, implementation or factors outside the control of the project team.

### Insecurity of religious minorities

The project activities confirmed the entrenched power hierarchy between different religious groups. At one extreme are the representatives of what the state calls "traditional" faiths, Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity. Islam is the religion of the majority, while Orthodox Christianity, the second largest community, enjoys a relatively safe environment, not least because of Kyrgyzstan's relations with Russia. Representatives of these groups are most comfortable, legally and politically. At the other end are religious minority groups that face varying degrees of pressure. Some Islamic groups are not registered or outright banned, such as Yakin Inkar. As a respondent said, there was an awkward moment when a member of a banned Muslim movement (spotted by the observer as they do not self-identify in public places) saw the title of his religious group in the list of banned organisations in the handouts. "He shut himself up and left the room soon after," the project staff recalls. In another example, Jehovah's Witnesses community members have long faced problems registering local organisations on dubious legal grounds. Following a wave of policies hostile to this group in Russia, the attitude of local communities also turned increasingly antagonistic.[4]

The small size of some religious groups is another factor that adds to their insecurity in rural areas. In localities other than Bishkek and Osh, a respondent says, it is a challenge to find representatives of religious minorities. They are small in number, which only adds to their feeling of insecurity. The problem is especially acute for ethnic Kyrgyz or Uzbek members of non-Muslim communities, who face harassment and demands for conversion back to Islam.

As a respondent recalls, such insecurity appeared well-founded as she observed, at times, an arrogant or condescending attitude of representatives of the religious majority towards minority groups. Furthermore, the project events often included a single member of religious minorities, a factor that only underscored their vulnerability.

### SCRA: limited neutrality and competence

The SCRA's involvement in the project discussed above had a positive impact but also posed a significant problem. The representatives from SCRA demonstrated an **inability to maintain neutrality** during specific discussions, often speaking as if they were advocating for a particular religion, Islam. These instances undermined the

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[4] Kazakbaeva, Elnura. "Barrier Analysis." Search for Common Ground, 2022, p. 26.

project's core idea of emphasising the importance of the Constitution, the state, and the rule of law in safeguarding religious freedom.

Indeed, the failure to ensure objectivity and impartiality is salient across the broader civil service. Acknowledging the problem, SCRA has approached Search to build its capacity to mainstream secularism and a neutral approach both in SCRA and across ministries and agencies. Notably, Search has put additional emphasis on mainstreaming constitutional and international standards on FoRB through training and consultative working group mechanisms in the framework of the project.

Another issue with the SCRA's involvement was the uneven composition of the groups recruited in some areas. For instance, in one town, the women's circle meeting included a group of students from a madrasa led by their teacher. This group held **strong anti-secular views** and actively engaged in unproductive exchanges with others. In another case, an older man dominated the discussion, silencing the rest, particularly the women. The facilitation experience of the project team and experts allowed for addressing these sorts of issues. However, such instances suggest that the recruitment process, led by SCRA, was haphazard, with insufficient effort to ensure that participants were informed about and interested in the subject matter.

## A schedule overload

The project as a whole lasted for 22 months, but the specific events in this component took place in less than a year. While the project team completed the planned activities, the overloaded schedule put unnecessary stress on team members. As a respondent stressed, this is not a trivial matter, as the nature and quality of the discussion can change depending not only on the time of the year but even a choice of the day of the week. Careful planning, in turn, requires greater breathing space between the events.

One possible reason for the schedule-related issues is an insufficient communication between Search and the CRS during the project design stage. Tight deadlines, staff turnover during critical project preparation phases, or other unplanned circumstances may contribute to this situation. Nevertheless, the project team feels closer collaboration during the project design stage would facilitate better planning of key activities.

## Limited depth of project intervention

One issue related to the overloaded schedule is the problem of the limited depth of the project intervention. The project activities were designed to encompass various formats and diverse localities, which helped reach a broader range of beneficiaries. However, this approach restricted the extent to which the project could engage with them. All project events were one-day affairs, allowing only a superficial exploration of many important topics. As one trainer puts it, the project provided a basic introduction akin to learning the alphabet ("azbuka", in his words). This is significant because most discussions were lively and constructive, revealing a **genuine hunger for information and discourse**. However, respondents felt that activities of a more practical nature were lacking, particularly regarding issues on which participants agreed but had little experience, such as addressing domestic abuse in the community.

The seemingly ad hoc nature of the activities may have contributed to the difficulty of gathering participants for the second round of women's circle meetings. To their credit, the project **team made a reasonable decision to focus on those participants who expressed strong interest** in specific areas of development, leveraging the "key people" instead of "more people".[5] Consequently, instead of a second wave of meetings in 13 locations, the women's circles transitioned into a series of online workshops. These meetings involved champions from the first round of women circles focusing on specific self-development themes, including leadership, stress management, planning, and related subjects.

On the one hand, the aforementioned issue reflects a necessary trade-off. Given the limited time and resources available, the project team had to choose between covering a greater number of themes, vulnerable groups, and geographic locations or delving deeper into fewer topics and target groups. On the other hand, the fact that project speakers acknowledged the lack of depth as an issue could serve as a foundation for more robust collaboration during the project planning phase.

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[5] Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) Basics. A Resource Manual. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2016. p. 36

# Recommendations for the future

The above sections discussed best practices, i.e., decisions and actions that contributed to good outcomes, and challenges, i.e., aspects of the project that could and should have gone better. Each of them is, in essence, a case of a lesson learned, whether drawing on what worked well or challenges faced in the process. In turn, this section draws from both sections above to formulate a set of actionable items for future and similar interventions drawing on what worked well and what did not.

## Strengthen partnerships and partners

A robust partnership with relevant state agencies, non-state organisations, and individual experts has been key to Search's success in this and similar projects. The expertise of the CRS allowed effective implementation of the project activities, while the proactive engagement of SCRA helped reach out to target groups that otherwise would be hard to secure. Constant focus on expanding the network of partners will ensure Search has direct access to the most suitable partners, whether for research, community activities, mobilisation of project participants or recruitment of effective experts for workshops.

At the same time, there are two areas in which Search can work to maximise the benefits of its partnership. First, close collaboration with key implementing partners should include the project design stage. Timely inputs and feedback from key partners will improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the project activities.

Second, Search can consider investing in the organisational capacities of state partners. As discussed above, the project activities revealed the inability of the SCRA to maintain unbiased standing as well as insufficient quality control within the organisation. Therefore, Search and the leadership of SCRA may consider ways to increase the effectiveness of relevant units within the SCRA to maximise the projects' impact.

## Representation: involve local authorities, balance religious communities

The project events featured religious authorities, other community activists, and local representatives of SCRA. However, similar projects will hugely benefit from ensuring greater participation of local actors. In particular, representatives of local authorities (village and rayon) and district police officers ("uchastkovyi") would enrich discussion and benefit from them, as they are directly relevant to addressing community problems raised.

Related but separate is the recommendation to increase the representation of religious minorities in areas where this is possible. In many regions, religious minorities are non-existent or too small a minority. However, in areas where religious diversity is evident, one respondent stressed inviting at least two persons from each community is important. In some activities, a single person from a religious minority felt more vulnerable and did not actively participate in a room dominated by religious majority representatives. Understandably, most local communities are predominantly Muslim,

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and the project rightly focuses on this group as critical for interfaith tolerance and dialogue. At the same time, the quality of such dialogue within the project activities benefits from ensuring at least two persons from each community in areas that host diverse religious groups.

## Invest in knowledge accumulation and sharing platform

Setting up and maintaining an effective system to accumulate, organise, and, when relevant, share knowledge will significantly benefit both the project implementing agencies and project beneficiaries. The activities at the level of local communities (discussions, debates, works in small groups and so on) produced an ample volume of interesting content. As project team members stressed, the information-discussion meetings and round tables were excellent venues where community members revealed their understanding of freedom of religion and its connection to gender equality and the rule of law. However, the project documentation contains a little trace of that content. Summaries or minutes (with necessary measures to safeguard the confidentiality of participants) of these discussions would provide excellent reference material to understand local dynamics better and compare across the regions or over time. This task does not require significant additional resources and can be quickly built into the project management system.

Furthermore, the project activities would benefit from making the presentations by invited experts available online in a user-friendly format. There are at least two reasons for this. First, such materials would help with a better comprehension of the topics. The content of talks and presentations was sophisticated, and the audience included people with various degrees of fluency on the subjects. As some respondents said, there were several cases when the meeting participants had to be corrected as the questions they asked revealed they misunderstood the message. Given the highly sensitive nature of the topics related to religion, religious practices and their alignment with the laws, social norms and so on, the potential impact of misunderstanding is high. Therefore, the implementing organisations might consider setting up an online platform to store the most important materials. This would a) allow access to valuable content to a much wider audience, b) maximise comprehension of the material due to the possibility of learning it at a convenient pace, and c) ensure extra transparency and clarity on the topics discussed.

The final point concerns the need for tools to measure the effectiveness of specific approaches used in the activities. In particular, a respondent noted that the project team had not prepared tools to assess the effectiveness of the art therapy approach. It was a novel one in the context of community-level activities, and a tracked evaluation of its impact would contribute to the "know how" knowledge and immensely benefit similar projects in the future.

## Plan for potential follow-up paths

Donor-funded projects commonly suffer from dependence on the funding cycle and funds availability, and many important projects end up being ad hoc cases of intervention. On the one hand, this is not something unexpected since many projects are designed to be a full-cycle set of activities that do not require continued funding.

On the other hand, projects that involve awareness-promoting activities at the community level are often seen by project beneficiaries as step one of a longer process. As several speakers said, many participants of the events approached them at the end with a question, "where do we go from here". Moreover, the scale and nature of the problem can also dictate the need for continuous engagement for greater impact. Raising awareness and understanding of the legal foundations of religious freedom at the local level belongs to such a type.

The implementing organisations cannot be expected to secure continued funding for the project. Regardless, they will benefit from early planning on potential follow-up paths. The bigger problem that the project seeks to address will likely remain relevant and require new and novel approaches. Ongoing and completed projects provide an excellent knowledge base on the most important paths forward. Thus, in this project, the respondents highlighted the high relevance of more applied follow-up activities. For instance, a pilot project in a particular locality on burial for religious minorities could become a model to replicate in other parts of the country. Another suggestion was working on narrower topics, such as religion and domestic violence, involving a deeper dive into the matter and hands-on workshops, which could better involve religious communities in solving social problems in the community.

## Conclusion

Overall, the design and execution of project activities matched well the objective of promoting awareness of the legal foundations of the freedom of religion. Through information and discussion meetings, round tables and women's circles in various parts of Kyrgyzstan, over 600 community members were exposed to in-depth discussions of freedom of religion and its implications for gender equality and interfaith relations. The findings suggest that the key message of the freedom of religion resting on the rule of law was well received.

Drawing on project documents and interviews with staff and team members, this study identified a set of lessons learned from the project. The key findings are organised into three categories (see Table 1): a) "best practices", i.e., elements and characteristics of the project that contributed to its success and could be taken aboard in similar projects; b) challenges and limitations; i.e., aspects of the project that could be adjusted or improved, and c) recommendations for the future projects.

**Table 1. Lessons learned: the summary**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Best practices: what has worked well?** | Advancing women's rights through freedom of religion |
| | Approach matters: searching for a common ground |
| | Women-only events are key for women to speak up |
| | Close collaboration with the national partner |
| | The team matters: respectful and respected speakers |
| | Targeting opinion-makers |
| | Setting the focus right: barrier analysis |
| | Setting the context right: the role of the core project team |
| **What has not worked well: challenges and limitations** | Insecurity of religious minorities |
| | Neutrality and competence of the state partner |
| | A schedule overload |
| | Limited depth of project intervention |
| **Recommendations for the future** | Strengthen partnerships and partners |
| | Involve local authorities, balance religious communities |
| | Invest in knowledge accumulation and sharing platform |
| | Plan for potential follow-up paths |

Overall, the lessons learned from the community activities in Kyrgyzstan underscore the importance of collaborative approaches, respectful dialogue, targeted engagement, and thorough analysis in promoting awareness of the legal framework of religious freedom. By applying these best practices and addressing the identified challenges, future projects can enhance their effectiveness in promoting awareness of the role of the rule of law in safeguarding religious freedom and protecting the rights of vulnerable groups.

## Annexe 1: List of interviews

1. Ilkham Umarakhunov, Search for Common Ground
2. Aidana Aitbaeva, Search for Common Ground
3. Saltanat Sulaimanbekova and the team at the Center for Religious Studies
4. Asel Dunganaeva, an invited speaker/expert
5. Nurlan Ismailov, an invited speaker/expert
6. Jyldyz Duishenova, moderator