Asia
Religious & Ethnic Freedom Activity (Asia REF)

Annual Learning Agenda Report – Year 2

January 2024

Table of Contents

Acronyms

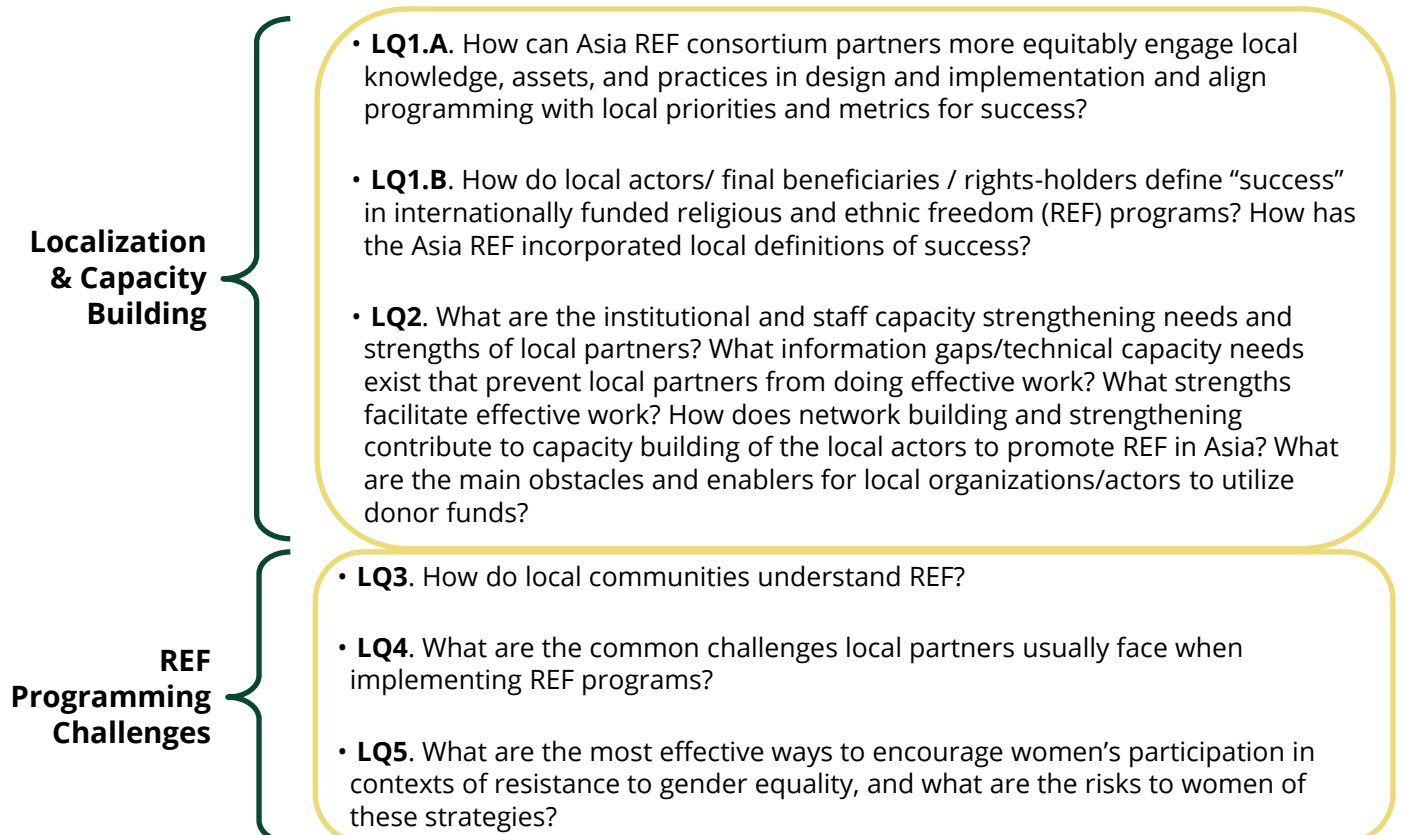|	
FORB	Freedom of Religion or Belief
GAM	Grounded Accountability Model
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
LQ	Learning Question
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
REF	Religious and Ethnic Freedom
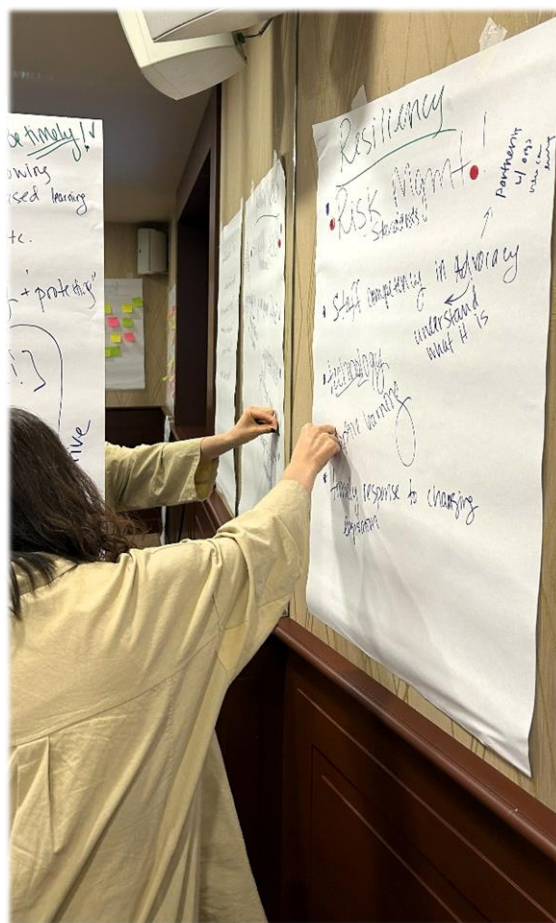
Introduction

The Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom (Asia REF) project started in October 2021 with the support of USAID and is being implemented by a consortium of five partners: Freedom House, Search for Common Ground, Pact, Internews, and the American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative. Asia REF works to expand international religious freedom in select countries across South and Central Asia and the Asia-Pacific region by working with local partners and diaspora organizations. The project includes capacity strengthening opportunities for local partners to advance the freedom of religion and conscience within their countries, address their immediate needs, and develop and access relevant resources. To date, the project has been active in nine countries across Asia and has collaborated with 26 local organizations.

Given the complex and fluid operating environment and the highly politicized and sensitive group dynamics in the region, the Asia REF project is anchored in flexible, complexity, and conflict-aware collaborating, learning, and adapting principles that are well-resourced and integrated throughout the program. Ongoing reflection and evidence-based decision making is championed by award leadership in partnership with the Asia REF Learning team through regular dialogues with local partners, iterative reviews of program data, and the integration of feedback from the field into project design and implementation. The learning agenda is focused on ensuring localization, capacity building of local actors, and identifying effective program implementation approaches to address international religious freedom challenges in Asia. The learning questions were finalized in December 2022 through a consultative process, including recommendations from the 2022 Asia REF Annual Learning Event and situational analysis.

Learning Questions (LQ)

Localization & Capacity Building

- **LQ1.A**. How can Asia REF consortium partners more equitably engage local knowledge, assets, and practices in design and implementation and align programming with local priorities and metrics for success?

- **LQ1.B**. How do local actors/ final beneficiaries / rights-holders define "success" in internationally funded religious and ethnic freedom (REF) programs? How has the Asia REF incorporated local definitions of success?

- **LQ2**. What are the institutional and staff capacity strengthening needs and strengths of local partners? What information gaps/technical capacity needs exist that prevent local partners from doing effective work? What strengths facilitate effective work? How does network building and strengthening contribute to capacity building of the local actors to promote REF in Asia? What are the main obstacles and enablers for local organizations/actors to utilize donor funds?

REF Programming Challenges

- **LQ3**. How do local communities understand REF?

- **LQ4**. What are the common challenges local partners usually face when implementing REF programs?

- **LQ5**. What are the most effective ways to encourage women's participation in contexts of resistance to gender equality, and what are the risks to women of these strategies?

The Asia REF learning agenda, with its five learning questions, contributes to USAID's broader Learning Agenda topics on Operational Learning and Strengthening Locally-led Development. By addressing critical questions on localization and capacity building, such as LQ1 and LQ2, Asia REF directly informs and enhances the strategies for engaging local knowledge and aligning international aid with local definitions of success, thus resonating with USAID's emphasis on locally-led development and evidence-based programming.

Alignment of Asia REF Learning Questions with USAID Learning Agenda

USAID FY 2022-2026 LEARNING QUESTIONS	ASIA REF LEARNING QUESTIONS
Operational Learning	
• Q1 - Operational effectiveness • Q7 - Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility	• LQ2 - Capacity strengthening needs • LQ3 - Community understanding of religious and ethnic freedom • LQ4 - Implementation challenges • LQ5 - Gender participation
Humanitarian - Development - Peace Nexus	
• Q1 - Operational effectiveness • Q6 - Migration and forced displacement	• LQ1 - Equitable engagement and local definitions of success • LQ2 - Capacity strengthening needs
Strengthening Locally-led Development	
• Q8 - Locally-led development	• LQ1 - Equitable engagement and local definitions of success • LQ3 - Community understanding of religious and ethnic freedom
Partnering and Engagement Approaches	
• Q5 - Affirmative development • Q9 - Partnering for sustainability	• LQ4 - Implementation challenges • LQ2 - Capacity strengthening needs

This report provides data and insights from 12 ongoing projects and one completed in 2023. These are supported by the results of research, workshops, and other activities from the second year's learning agenda, analyzed against each learning question. The findings are not comprehensive; they serve as a preliminary reflection that intended to guide adaptive management and evidence-based project implementation. Additionally, in line with USAID's view that the Learning agenda also intends to create behavioral change to strengthen the use of evidence to improve organizational effectiveness, this project also tracks how activities from the learning agenda help in creating and using evidence, and whether they are influencing staff attitudes and behaviors towards learning. Part of this effort, the Asia REF project strives to establish a supportive and safe environment for the consortium and local partners for continuous reflection and learning.

Data Sources for Year 2 Annual Learning Agenda Report

Asia REF projects quarterly reports

- May - September 2023

Quarterly learning network meetings

- March 28, 2023
- June 27, 2023
- September 27, 2023
- December 20, 2023

Year 2 annual learning events

- October 10-12, 2023
- November 14-15, 2023

Annual partners survey (20 respondents)

- August - September 2023

Local REF perspective workshops (GAM workshops)

- March - September 2023
- Kyrgyzstan - March 13-15, 2023
- Kazakhstan - May 15-17, 2023
- Indonesia - June 6-7, 2023
- Sri-Lanka - July 11-12, 2023
- Bangladesh - August 11-12, 2023
- Nepal - September 3-5, 2023

SWOT exercises conducted with civil society organizations in above-mentioned countries

- March - September 2023 (together with GAM workshops)

The report is structured into two main chapters, each corresponding to the primary themes of the learning agenda followed by a conclusion. The main chapters offer a concise analysis of the outcomes for each learning question, program implications and adjustments, and next year's plans. The conclusion section provides a summary of key takeaways and their broader implications.

I. Localization and Capacity Building

1.1: Equitable engagement and local definitions of success

LQ1.A. How can Asia REF consortium partners more equitably engage local knowledge, assets, and practices in design and implementation and align programming with local priorities and metrics for success?

LQ1.B. How do local actors/ final beneficiaries / rights-holders define "success" in internationally funded REF programs? How has the Asia REF incorporated local definitions of success?

In order to align programming with local metrics of success, the Year 2 learning focused on understanding local definitions of Success. Success in REF programs is defined variably across countries. Common themes include:

- **Positive transformations: *"Creating positive changes at the local level."*** – This is a key success indicator as voiced by local and consortium partners. The positive change intended includes enhancing social tolerance among various groups, raising public awareness in freedom of religion or belief (FORB) issues, policy reforms, and socio-economic empowerment of gender and marginalized groups, among others. Detailed elaboration was provided during workshops on developing local indicators for six countries. However, further learning agenda activities revealed that the indicators developed in these workshops resonated broadly with Asian challenges in ensuring FORB and combating discrimination. Four projects in Indonesia and Kyrgyzstan have already incorporated these indicators in their work. At the time of writing this report, consortium partners were exploring the possibility of integrating these indicators into project designs in Sri Lanka, Kazakhstan, and Nepal. To further strengthen localization of indicators, Asia REF management has recommended that consortium partners conduct similar exercises in countries where Asia REF projects are planned or being implemented. The Asia REF Learning team will provide technical support and guidance for those interested in replicating the process.

- **Achieving intended results: *"Set certain goals and manage to accomplish them."*** – This understanding of success is linked to managerial and institutional capabilities for project implementation, which is crucial for nascent organizations. It also reflects the complexities of the environments in which these projects are operated. Most Asia REF activities take place in countries with authoritarian regimes, restrictive policies on FORB, and shrinking spaces for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights work. In these conditions, achieving set incremental goals is seen by partners as a challenge and an indicator of success if achieved. Some partners noted that the mere presence of active projects (successful registration of projects with government bodies) on this theme in some countries is already an indicator of success, laying the foundation for further strategic planning and program development. This demonstrates that not only achieving set qualitative and quantitative indicators is important, but also the process of achieving them. The consortium has adopted a policy of flexible and empathetic approach to address corresponding issues. Asia REF management was flexible in adjusting project timelines through no-cost extensions to accommodate long registration processes with authorities.

- **Organizational empowerment: *"Be able to address REF effectively."*** – Local actors note that having technical expertise, identifying the most effective approaches to promoting FORB at the local level, and the ability to implement them is an indicator of success. To achieve this, the Asia REF project offers various thematic learning materials and activities related to understanding religious freedom (e.g., Local Changemakers courses, participation in workshops, and providing consultations) and ethnic freedom (communities of practice on diaspora issues). Additionally, the Asia REF Learning team and consortium partners provide workshops and consultations to individual organizations to enhance the institutional capabilities of local partners in operational and financial issues.

- **Sustainability of efforts: *"Seeing others build on your efforts*."*** – A consistent understanding of success in all efforts involves having sustainable changes and community ownership of programs, with continuation by local actors. Local actors highlight collaborative efforts against discrimination, the presence of like-minded individuals with whom reforms can be promoted, results shared, and new approaches learned to ensure sustainability. An important aspect for ensuring the sustainability of projects is also the ability to work with government bodies and align with government priorities and find common ground. Asia REF's network building initiatives (connecting local partners with external networks on FORB, with online communities on ConnexUs, and in an internal Asia REF learning network) aim to support these approaches for sustainability.

Implications for Asia REF:

The definitions of success are tied to local contexts, values, and needs. There is a significant emphasis on sustainability, societal change, and capacity building. The need for tangible, measurable outcomes is balanced with recognizing intangible successes, like establishing projects in challenging environments. The quarterly reports indicate that the consortium partners are making relevant efforts to engage with local knowledge, assets, and practices in their respective projects. They are employing participatory approaches, adapting terminology, and involving local stakeholders to align programming with the specific contexts and priorities of their target regions. Thus, through almost all projects, local partners were involved in co-creation to develop a shared understanding of the project's goals and methodology. Local experts were

engaged in designing the project curriculums or toolkits, as were targeted groups such as youth, indigenous communities, religious minorities, and women. All project-related materials have been translated into the local languages. In the next year Asia REF will:

Shift towards including qualitative measures like changes in attitudes and beliefs, alongside quantitative outcomes.

Emphasize working with government actors and aligning projects with their priorities to ensure recognition and support. Comply with government administration and have a clear process in terms of selection and registration of local partners.

Engage local actors in the project design, implementation, and evaluation process to ensure sustainability of the efforts.

Focus on capacity strengthening and mentorship initiatives to equip local actors with skills for organizational effectiveness, sustainability, and resilience.

Incorporate room for adaptive management to accommodate contextual changes and recognize smaller successes.

1.2: Capacity strengthening needs

LQ2. What are the institutional and staff capacity strengthening needs and strengths of local partners? What information gaps/technical capacity needs exist that prevent local partners from doing effective work? What strengths facilitate effective work? How does network building and strengthening contribute to capacity building of the local actors to promote REF in Asia?

Local Partners' Institutional Strengths:

- Local partners demonstrate a deep understanding of the needs of their communities and the geographical context in which they operate. This knowledge enables them to design programs tailored to the specific requirements of their target populations.
- Local partners have established trust and engagement with communities, religious groups, and local stakeholders, facilitating effective and contextually relevant interventions.
- Local partners possess dedicated staff and demonstrate a commitment to quality and have expertise in specific domains, suggesting a strong foundation for effective work.
- Despite needing refinement, local partners have some operational frameworks and decision-making processes, indicating a basic level of organizational efficiency that can be built upon.
- Local partners demonstrate the ability to quickly learn and apply new skills. Some partners, despite being new in promoting FORB, were recognized for their flexibility, resourcefulness, and ability to adapt new knowledge and skills.

Local Partners' Institutional Needs:

- Across several projects, there is a noted need for transitioning from informal to formal standards, developing tailored quality standards, and incorporating specific methodologies, such as peacebuilding approaches to FORB.

- A common theme is the need for enhanced strategic planning, better alignment between operational and programmatic decisions, and a deeper understanding of operational policies.
- Many organizations face challenges in diversifying donors, establishing long-term staffing strategies, and developing sustainable funding models, which are crucial for their long-term impact and independence.
- There is a need for support and training in report writing and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), conceptualizing, presenting, and introducing learnings into the project design and implementation. A need for increased external evaluations and analytical skills to inform project design and make adaptive decisions based on changing contexts and needs.
- Local partners need to build their own institutional capacity to manage these gaps and strengthen their grantees' organizational capacities. Many local partners also work with community-based organizations, often through small grants, and note challenges in supporting them due to gaps in their proposal development capabilities and overall project management skills.

Local Partners' Information Gaps and Technical Capacity Needs:

- Local partners require advanced training in FORB, including its intersectionality with gender and other rights, to deepen their understanding and effectiveness in advocacy and program implementation.
- Skills in engaging with diverse stakeholders, particularly religious leaders and authoritarian governments, are necessary for local partners to navigate the complex socio-political landscapes in which they operate.
- An understanding of the impact of governments policies (i.e. anti-extremism policies, blasphemy, NGO regulations) on REF is needed for local partners to design and implement programs that are both effective and sensitive to the broader operational environment.
- There is a clear gap in local knowledge on donors' landscape, requirements, policies, and standards and a need for information exchange between INGOs/donors and local partners to understand and respect existing processes and adapt them if necessary.

Local Partners' Strengths Facilitating Effective Work:

- The expressed interest in learning about various aspects of FORB and its intersectionality indicates a strong desire for growth and improvement among partners, as well as shows a commitment to inclusivity and addressing broader social issues.
- Strong local / national networks, existing partnerships, and Asia REF learning meetings facilitate collaboration, resource-sharing, and the exchange of best practices.
- Local partners demonstrate a capacity to identify and mobilize local resources, adapt to changing circumstances, and navigate complex regulatory environments.
- The grassroots nature and high levels of idealism drive many Asia REF local partners' work and dedication to their cause. This enables them to creatively modify and translate their ideas for grassroots communities.

Implications for Asia REF:

Most projects included specific training sessions to address capacity and technical gaps, such as orientational trainings, covering reporting requirements on programmatic reporting, financial reporting, and MEL. Separate consultations with financial staff on procurement and budgeting requirements were organized for the partners that indicate that need within the capacity assessment phase. For the

organizations lacking promoting FORB or gender / social inclusivity expertise, separate training opportunities, consultancy, and continuous mentorship have been provided by consortium partners. In the projects that work with community-based organizations through small granting mechanisms, consortium partners apply different strategies to manage the risks associated with the capacity of nascent organizations. Both increasing the amount of time to jointly finalize applications and conducting separate project proposal development training.

Successful projects often showed a high degree of adaptation and flexibility, involving collaboration between different types of organizations, leveraging each other's strengths and resources. As some consortium partners mentioned, working with 'non-traditional' partners from the private sector opens the opportunity to have additional resources added to the project and expands the project's reach, in addition to creating greater sustainability. Local partners identified that, thanks to their Asia REF partnerships, they have gained greater strength in project management, facilitation skills, flexibility in fieldwork, and perspective for designing activities in the future.

The analysis indicates a complex interplay of needs and strengths among local partners in Asia working on REF. While there are significant gaps in local partners' understanding of specific issues like FORB, relevant thematic expertise, and project management, there is also a strong foundation of adaptability, resourcefulness, and existing networks. Training, mentorship, and network building emerge as critical strategies for capacity strengthening. To apply this learning, next year Asia REF will:

Adapt to the needs of the local partners and be cognizant of different learning styles and tones/framing while providing capacity strengthening opportunities.	Facilitate networks and peer-to-peer exchanges between local partner organizations to share experiences and strategies for implementing, particularly in highly sensitive topics or restrictive environments.	Create an environment that fosters shared collaboration, allowing local partners to easily inquire about the skills and knowledge gained from post-training experiences.
Conduct consultations with partners about applying lessons learned, ensuring a practical link between training and implementation.	Focus on resource provision (funding, equipment), specialized training (proposal writing, thematic expertise), and strategic development skills.	Identify the main obstacles and enablers for local organizations to utilize donor funds.

II. Religious and Ethnic Freedoms Programming Challenges

2.1: Community understanding of religious and ethnic freedom

LQ3. How do local communities understand REF?

A [Grounded Accountability Model (GAM)](#)-aligned approach was utilized to understand REF from the perspective of local actors across six countries ([Kyrgyzstan](#), [Kazakhstan](#), [Indonesia](#), [Sri Lanka](#), [Nepal, and Bangladesh](#)). The participatory approach of GAM-aligned workshops led to the development of co-created, localized indicators of REF, localizing human rights and peacebuilding efforts by understanding the local context and dynamics, recognizing cultural specificities, preferences, and practices. This aims to strengthen the capacity and buy-in of local actors and ensure sustainability of projects.

Analyzing the indicators from the workshops across various countries reveals both common and specific themes regarding the understanding of religious freedom from the perspectives of NGOs, religious minorities, and majorities.

- A recurring theme across all countries is the desire for *social inclusion and mutual respect* among different religious groups. This includes the ability to practice religious beliefs without fear, celebrate religious festivals, and respect for diverse religious identities.
- There is a consistent call for *legal and institutional frameworks* that support religious freedom. This includes equal treatment before the law, non-discriminatory policies in education and public services, and protection from religious-based prosecution.
- Another common point is *the role of the media in shaping perceptions*. Participants across countries emphasize the need for responsible media coverage that avoids sensationalism and promotes understanding among different religious groups.

The Asia REF Intermediate Results include all these areas, responding to the common demands of advancing REF in the region. However, each country presents unique indicators that reflect their specific cultural and societal context. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, the importance of burying deceased family members in local cemeteries highlights the cultural significance of burial practices. In contrast, Indonesia's emphasis on identification cards not indicating religious affiliation points to issues of identity and national unity. Some regions place a stronger emphasis on the rights of gender and ethnic minorities. In Kazakhstan, the freedom of women to choose their religion without family or community pressure was highlighted. While in Nepal, the focus was on the rights of the LGBTQI+ community and marginalized ethnic groups.
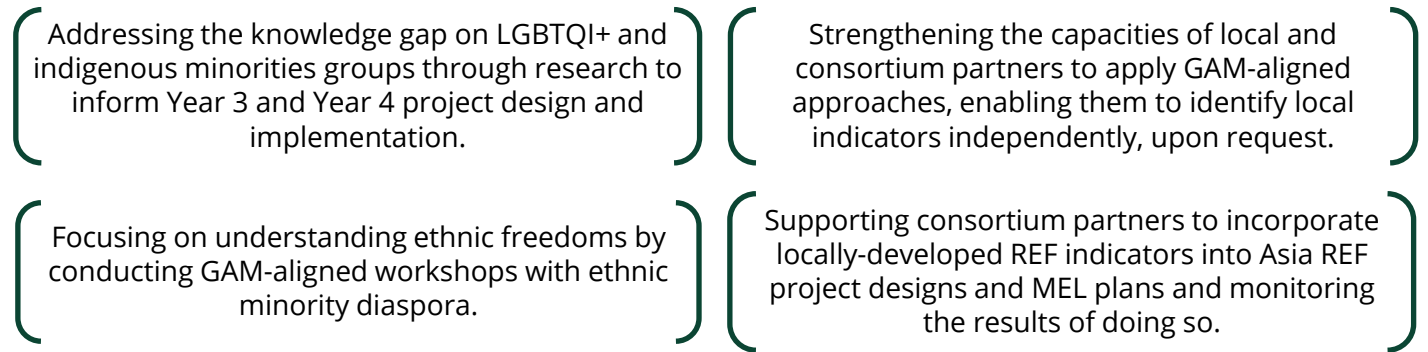
Implications for Asia REF:

The diversity of indicators reflects the complexity of REF as a concept that is deeply intertwined with cultural, legal, and social factors. It is evident that while there are overarching themes of respect, inclusion, and legal protection, the specific expressions of these themes vary greatly depending on the local context. Additionally, there is a need to maintain a balance between respecting local interpretations of REF and adhering to universal human rights principles and "Do No Harm" approach. Implementers should cross-check data with other sources to enhance validity and mitigate biases to ensure a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the local context.

The application of the workshops' outcomes can be used in project design (technical proposals and MEL plans), mid-term and final evaluations, and the collection of personal stories, making indicators more

meaningful and "living". Four Asia REF projects, two each in Kyrgyzstan and Indonesia, have used the data for these countries to design their programs and have already started implementation, and a number of other consortium partners are in the process of projects' development. Given the dynamic nature of cultural and religious contexts, the indicators should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they remain relevant and effective. Asia REF also recommends that all consortium partners conduct similar exercises in the target communities of their projects.

Next year Asia REF will build on these findings through:

Addressing the knowledge gap on LGBTQI+ and indigenous minorities groups through research to inform Year 3 and Year 4 project design and implementation.	Strengthening the capacities of local and consortium partners to apply GAM-aligned approaches, enabling them to identify local indicators independently, upon request.
Focusing on understanding ethnic freedoms by conducting GAM-aligned workshops with ethnic minority diaspora.	Supporting consortium partners to incorporate locally-developed REF indicators into Asia REF project designs and MEL plans and monitoring the results of doing so.

2.2: Implementation challenges

LQ4. What are the common challenges local partners usually face when implementing REF programs?

The main external challenges identified include difficulties operating in the countries with authoritarian regimes, abiding by strict governmental policies, and facing economic constraints and inflation:

● Local partners face challenges due to political instability, especially during election periods, where identity politics and social tensions can escalate.

● Some local partners grapple with restrictive legal frameworks and policies, hostility towards NGOs and human rights language from authorities and communities, and issues of safety and security of staff in promoting REF.

● Cultural norms and societal pressures, especially regarding all gender's participation in REF projects, pose significant challenges to local partners as reported in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

● Economic challenges impact project budgets, leading to reduced resources and increased strain on local partners' staff and project participants.

The challenges identified indicate a complex interplay of political, economic, cultural, and legal factors that impact the implementation of REF projects. The political environment, particularly during elections, can exacerbate religious and ethnic tensions, necessitating careful campaign alignment and misinformation management. Hostile political landscapes and legal frameworks in authoritarian regimes create a challenging environment for REF initiatives, where openly promoting FORB can be risky. Economic factors

like inflation add to the complexity, impacting budget allocations and the feasibility of planned activities. These external factors, coupled with internal challenges like recruitment difficulties, barriers to women's participation, and lengthy bureaucratic registration processes, hinder timely and smooth project implementation and emphasize the need for adaptive program management sensitive to local contexts.

Implications for Asia REF:

Asia's REF projects respond to these challenges in different ways. For example, some projects working in countries with authoritarian regimes have localized the language of the program to the local context and focus on promoting REF through social cohesion and tolerance activities and developing alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. To address the possible growing religious tension arising from the election periods, partners equip target stakeholders, such as content creators, with updated trending issues that shape public sentiment on particular religious groups to help them prepare suitable content that can counter possible disinformation against minorities and to promote alternative positive narratives. To avoid safety and security risks, the consortium partners work with local partners on developing strategic communication and security protocols. Asia REF will continue to support local partners to mitigate these challenges and:

Enhance the capacity of local partners, particularly in project proposal development, human rights language adaptation, and safety and security measures.

Establish safety and security protocols for local partners, especially in regions where REF activities might attract negative attention from state actors or other groups, including referral systems for emergency assistance.

Share learning and best practices from effected recruitment strategies that ensure inclusion of minority groups and women in project activities.

Adapt flexible management approaches to accommodate political, economic, and cultural changes. This includes being prepared for unexpected delays due to political or economic instability and adjusting project timelines and objectives accordingly.

Adjust communication strategies to be less sensitive and more aligned with the local context. This includes reframing human rights monitoring as social cohesion monitoring and avoiding direct human rights language in sensitive contexts.

2.3: Women's participation

> **LQ5**. What are the most effective ways to encourage women's participation in contexts of resistance to gender equality, and what are the risks to women of these strategies?

The intersectionality of gender and REF poses multifaceted challenges across Asia. Cultural and societal norms significantly influence women's roles and participation in religious matters, often leading to discrimination and restricted opportunities. Women face double discrimination due to their gender and religious affiliations, particularly in patriarchal societies where religious leadership is male-dominated. Harassment and safety concerns are prevalent, especially when women engage in sensitive issues like

religious freedom. Policy barriers, such as discriminatory laws and institutional practices, further inhibit women's participation.

In the second year of the award, the Learning team focused on exploring the challenges women face in fulfilling their right to FORB. For this purpose, along with a literature review and webinars, local actors in six countries were consulted as part of the local REF perspectives workshops. The results of these discussions, as well as the experiences of ongoing Asia REF projects, form the framework for this section. The main identified challenges include:

- In Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and other regions, the intersection of women and FORB presents challenges like discrimination in education and workplaces, gender-biased religious conversions, and limited religious leadership roles for women.
- In Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, societal norms and practices, such as familial pressure, religious superstitions, and gender norms in religious practices, impede women's participation and leadership in religious and community matters.
- Discriminatory regulations and policies, as seen in Indonesia and Central Asia, create obstacles to women's full participation in religious and community life.
- Women involved in matters like religious freedom and reconciliation face potential harassment from community members and authorities, as noted in Sri Lanka, this limits their desire and opportunities to participate in the projects like Asia REF.

Despite the short period of project implementation, local and consortium partners have been able to apply some strategies for addressing problems and promoting women's participation that have already demonstrated their relative effectiveness. These include activities related to capacity building, adjusting project designs for inclusion, creating safe and inclusive spaces, and promoting gender-responsive approaches. In Sri Lanka, the local partner trained women in gender equality and social inclusion analysis (GESI) and employed more women in FORB work. Local partners working on research projects ensured gender inclusion in project budgets and balanced gender representation in data collection. Local partners in Türkiye offered childcare services and safe workshop environments for women that increased their participation in project activities. However, there are still difficulties in ensuring GESI, the representation of minority groups and women in projects' activities and data collection efforts. Partners are incorporating gender-responsive and transformative approaches in project activities to acknowledge and address gender inequalities. For example, the Indonesian team has planned a social media campaign focusing on gender issues, aimed to encourage solidarity between minority groups, especially LGBTQI+ and religious minorities, and women from diverse religious backgrounds in business.

In addition, in country consultations with partners it was noted that it is useful to look for local historical roots in mainstreaming women's participation. In Sri Lanka, for example, efforts to empower women leadership could be based on their established roles as problem solvers and community leaders. Women

are frequently engaging with community members in order to conduct daily businesses, in their everyday lives and to resolve community issues. This has allowed for the opportunity to create a network for themselves.

Implications for Asia REF:

In the following years of Asia REF implementation, the Learning team will focus on identifying effective strategies for participation of all genders in projects and the risks associated with this participation. Building on this initial learning, Asia REF will:

> Improve data collection practices to capture all genders' voices and experiences accurately to inform more effective program designs.

> Explore 'non-traditional'/ innovative ways to encourage participation of all genders, i.e. engaging men and boys as allies in promoting gender equality and women's rights in religious and community contexts.

> Monitor how gender and cultural sensitivity is integrated into aspects of programming, from project design to implementation, by creating safe and inclusive spaces, using localized terminology, and safety measures against harassment.

> Strengthen women's capacities through targeted training and education, particularly in areas like GESI analysis, leadership, and REF advocacy to empower them as active participants and leaders.
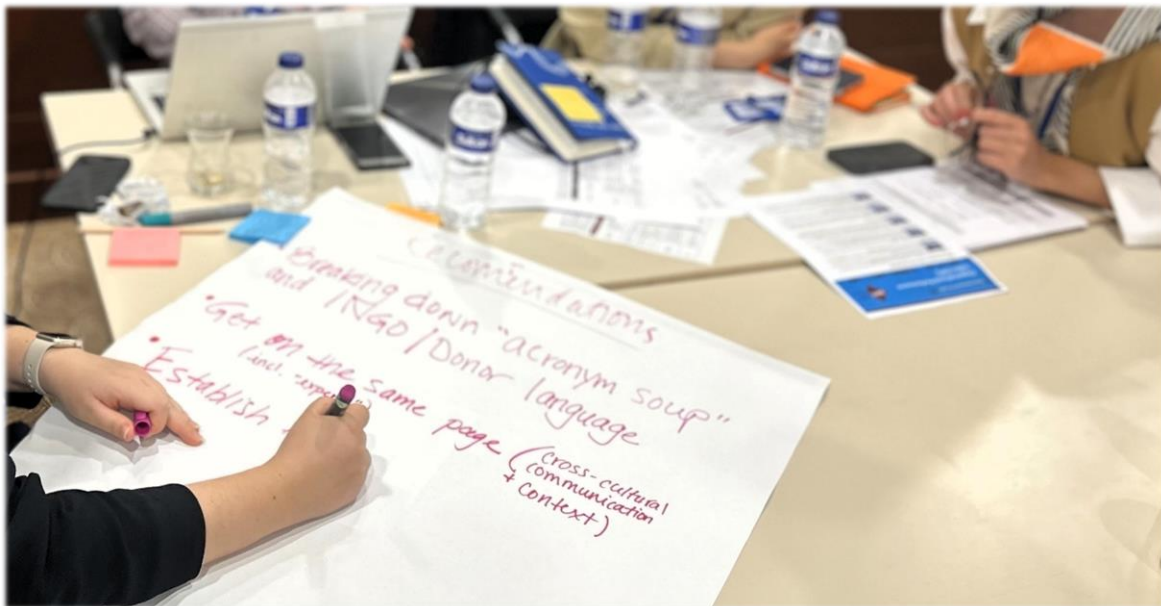
Conclusion

Across the learning questions, a consistent theme is the critical importance of understanding and integrating local perspectives and contexts in REF programs. This includes recognizing local definitions of success, addressing capacity strengthening needs, and appreciating the nuanced dynamics of religious and ethnic diversity in Asia. Success in REF projects is multifaceted, with local actors emphasizing tangible outcomes, societal attitude shifts, government alignment, and community empowerment. Tailored approaches, considering factors like countries' political sensitivities or cultural norms affecting women's participation, are essential for the effectiveness of REF programs.

Another recurring theme is the need for capacity strengthening of partners, particularly in FORB and relevant thematic expertise areas, proposal development and project management in complex contexts, and inclusive participation strategies. Challenges in ensuring religious, ethnic, indigenous, and gender minority groups participation highlight the necessity for the development and strengthening of platforms that ensure diverse representation. The safety and security concerns of local partners, especially in hostile to REF political and social environments, call for developing safety and security protocols. The Asia REF countries' dynamic nature of political and economic landscapes also underscores the need for adaptive management strategies. The lessons learned highlight the importance of contextually grounded, gender-sensitive, and adaptable approaches in promoting REF.

To increase the effectiveness and sustainability of programs, Asia REF will continue to:

Prioritize strategies that promote local engagement and ownership, involving local actors in all phases of program design and implementation to ensure cultural relevance and sustainability.

Focus on capacity strengthening and mentorship for local partners, addressing gaps in strategic planning, resource mobilization, advocacy, and legal and technical expertise.

Implement adaptive program design and monitoring, requiring flexibility and responsiveness to changing local contexts and employing both qualitative and quantitative metrics for assessment.

Encourage strong networks and partnerships among local actors, government institutions, and other stakeholders to facilitate knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and collective advocacy.

Promote continuous learning and feedback mechanisms within REF programs, involving regular meetings and analysis of data, sharing of lessons learned, and adjusting strategies accordingly.

Develop strategies that specifically address gender dynamics and promote all genders participation in REF initiatives. Ensure these strategies are sensitive to the risks involved and are supported by community engagement and education.