

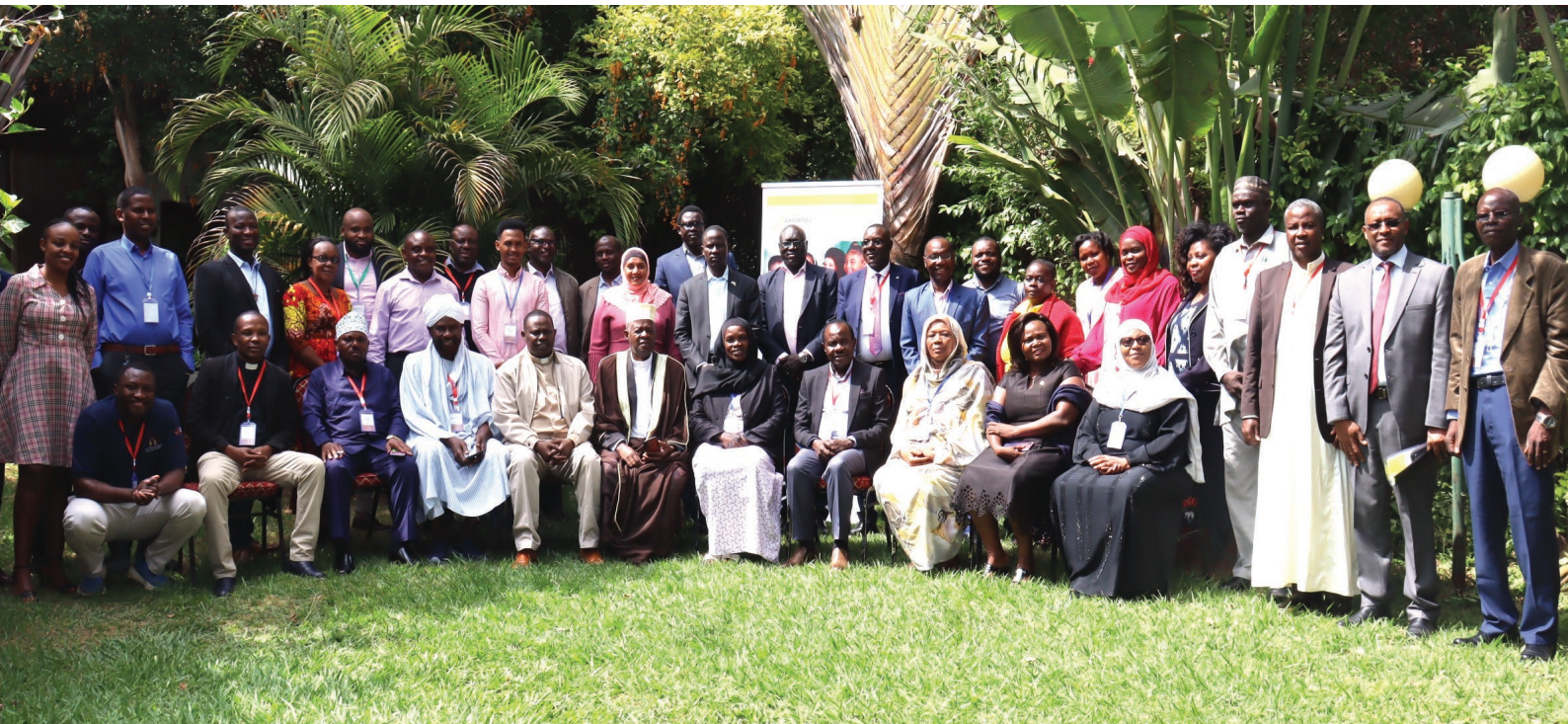


# Faith Actors Promoting Social Cohesion

Regional Faith Leaders Forum



# Working with Faith actors in promoting Social Cohesion



Faith communities play a central role in promoting Social Cohesion in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa Region. Faith communities have spiritual capital and comparative advantage that can drive the peace agenda forward. Religious actors are often known to support a myriad of localized peace programs as well as significant engagement at the national level in advocacy and peace-building processes. Religious leaders are seen as capable of unifying people, connecting them, and bringing them together for peace-making activities.

It is through this realization that the Regional Faith Leaders Forum (RFLF) was initiated by Arigatou International in collaboration with the Norwegian Church Aid in 2020 to promote Social Cohesion and Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in the region. The RFLF is a platform of faith leaders from 7 countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda) in the Horn and East Africa region. It is part of the wider Regional Peace Programme (RPP).

The Forum seeks to enhance the capacity of faith actors to promote social cohesion and FoRB, Prevent and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) and promote social action for peace. Through the forum, faith actors aim to form a community of practice around promoting FoRB and Social Cohesion in the region.

First held virtually in 2020, this year's forum happened in-person in Nairobi Kenya, from 23 - 27 May, bringing together 27 diverse faith leaders. The week-long forum themed *Faith Actors Promoting Social Cohesion and FoRB* focused on enhancing faith leaders' understanding of FoRB while identifying challenges towards promoting FoRB in the region. The forum further provided a platform for the faith leaders to reflect on the best practices towards promotion of FoRB in the region.

# Why focus on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)

Fred Nyabera, Director of Arigatou International - End Child Poverty explained that Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is part of human rights. We believe that if we meaningfully engage in human rights including FoRB, then we are responding to human needs, and all of us have universal needs. For example, nobody wants to be discriminated against because of their faith, nobody wants to face any physical violence because of their faith. We also have cultural violence including stereotypes and negative views about each others' religion. We further have structural issues that undermine FoRB in the region. These involves laws and policies that tend to undermine some faiths; or lack of implementation of laws that protect FoRB.



## Did you know that ...

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.

## Building blocks of the Regional Faith Leaders Forum

- ✓ Knowledge advancement
- ✓ Development and promotion of skills
- ✓ Change of attitude and values
- ✓ Take action



Through this forum, we want to counter some of these forms of FoRB violations and also engage in advocacy to make sure that laws protecting FoRB are implemented at country level. *Fred Nyabera, Director, Arigatou International - End Child Poverty.*



## Growing up as a Muslim - Nageeba Hassan

*I was born and raised as a Muslim in Uganda. But we grew up in an interfaith kind of context. We had neighbours and relatives who are not Muslims. Usually, our mum could cook food and give us to take to people who are needy. Being young, sometimes I would carry back the food and say I found Christians. But my mum would tell us that it's not about religion, it's about hunger. She would strictly order me to take back the food to them regardless of their faith. Similarly, we donated clothes to the neighbourhood, for both Christian and muslim children. During Christmas day, my mum would cook some nice food for us, get us nice clothes and put a Christmas tree in our sitting room. Asked by neighbours why she did that yet she was Muslim, she would tell them that her children (Nageeba included) often interated (played, ate, schooled) with the Chirstian children so she didn't see any need not to also celebrate Christmas. I have carried on these values of co-existence and promoting peace within my community. In my career as a teacher and even currently in my organization, these values of co-existence and interfaith coopration have propelled my work and have become part of my life.*



## Celebrating each other

*Gerald Acho - Program Lead,  
Regional Peace Program*

Part of our efforts to build social cohesion and promote FoRB within communities is learning to celebrate and appreciate others. This appreciation should transcend religious and cultural affiliations. Appreciating and celebrating others is a sign that we understand our unique value within the community and the existence of others does not in any way threaten our existence. Celebrating others is also a sign that we have embraced diversity. Faith actors from different religious backgrounds must celebrate and appreciate others. This can be done through joining in the celebration of religious feasts and attending fellowships with other religions upon invitation. Doing all these does not in any way mean one has abandoned their religion but rather, it is a sign of unity. It is a sign that we have embraced each other and are willing to work together. Celebrating each other means we have given ourselves time to get to know each other. This is very important for building more peaceful and cohesive societies that treat everyone as equals.





## Reflections on FoRB and Peace in the region

- Need for contextualization of FoRB, in order to enable faith actors to be more sensitive about each others' faith, thus reducing stereotypes and judgment.
- There is poor implementation of laws and policies protecting FoRB in most countries within the region.
- There is a need for faith actors to engage with families and educate them on diversity and inclusion. Stronger family units will help challenge some stereotypes and prejudice about other religions and cultures.
- There is notable progress in opening up spaces for youth and women in religious institutions as well as political settings. It was noted that substantial representation of women and youth in religious institutions is more important than numerical representation.
- Communities should be educated about their rights and the laws that protect them, including FoRB. Some political leaders often take advantage of this lack of information and knowledge to manipulate and use people.
- Faith actors need to distinguish between government support towards a particular religion and the official government position towards religion.
- Valuing and appreciating others does not mean that one has to abandon his/her religion. For example, a Muslim celebrating Christmas.





## Faith communities working together

- Dr. Mustafa Y. Ali - Secretary General, Global Network of Religions for children



Members of different religions are called upon to work together for the common good of humanity, promote human dignity and engage in activities that can promote social cohesion. Faith actors must work together to provide alternative narratives and engage young people in inter-generational dialogue in an effort to address the emerging challenges affecting society.

## Being a youth in the Regional Faith Leaders Forum

Kang Linus

Youth is a stage where you are very active in life. A stage where you explore various things left and right. This forum is very good for young people because when young people come here, doubts about interfaith relations are clarified. It also helps you as a young person to see how to implement FoRB where you work; how you can live with different people despite their religious affiliation. So as a young man and faith leader in South Sudan being in this program, I have been exposed to see things differently and live with my brothers and sisters without necessarily judging them. So when you bring people together like in this forum, you learn more things about them and their religious backgrounds and that clears more doubts in us. This forum has built my capacity on social cohesion and one strongly feel all of us are created by one God and we have to live together, respect each other without religion separating us.

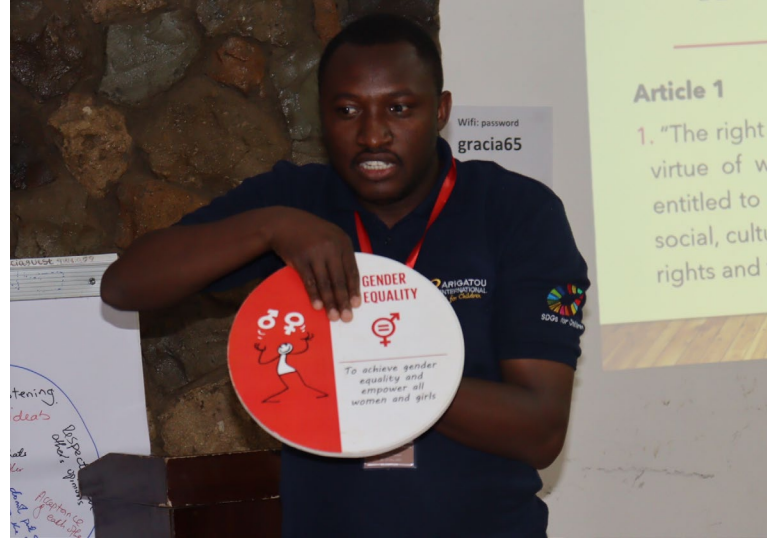


# FoRB and Sustainable Development

The concept of FoRB and Sustainable Development was relatively new to most faith actors. It was noted that it is necessary to conduct more research in order to establish the relationship between FoRB and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) especially in the African context. It was noted that the SDGs are already part of what the faith actors are doing to promote FoRB but there was need for much awareness on the SDGs. For example, most faith actors within the region are involved in program to alleviate hunger by providing food and feeding the vulnerable. That is responding to SDG 2 on Zero Hunger.

The declaration on the right to development, states that the right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized. Pillars of sustainable development are economic, social, and environmental.

Participants were further enlightened about The African Interfaith Initiative on SDGs, (AFLI). AFLI is an open platform for Faith Actors in Africa to collaborate, build solidarity, and articulate a common position around the implementation of the SDGs and Agenda 2030 in general.



There are elements of Sustainable Development in our efforts to promote FoRB. As faith actors, we need to be aware and much involved in achieving the SDGs even as we promote FoRB. Achievement of the SDGs will enable promotion of FoRB.

*Michael Adikwu - Arigatou International*



We need more dialogue and awareness on FoRB in order to promote Social Cohesion

*Garaad Abdulqadir - Faith Actor Somalia*



# Impact of interfaith cooperation in communities

*Maria Menego*

*Maria Menego, from the Council of Women Clergy in Mombasa, Kenya narrates some of the successes of interfaith cooperation in the communities. She recalls the story of a Muslim woman who had attended a church service where the Pastor ministered on forgiveness and the need to strengthen families. The woman had been divorced for three years and immediately after the sermon, she resorted to forgive her husband and thereafter got their marriage back on track. Maria says she was struck by the fact that though the woman was Muslim, she took in the sermon and took action with regards to the theme of forgiveness and letting go.*

*Maria also narrates the story of another Muslim woman whose house had collapsed and came to her for help. Maria mobilised support from local authorities, religious leaders and community members. Together, they were able to build the woman a new house.*

*Maria credits these successes to positive interfaith relations in her community. She emphasizes on the need for people to co-exist without religious boundaries. She urges religious leaders to promote and be first custodians of promoting FoRB.*



## FoRB and Women

Men and women have different experiences of FoRB violations. Men primarily experience FoRB violations in the public sphere, while women face violations both in the public and the private sphere (in the home and family). In addition, Women face intersectional discrimination. Women are likely to face harassment, discrimination and violence both because of their gender and/or their religion or belief.

### Some reflections

- Some religious institutions continue to promote gender roles where women continue to receive secondary roles in society.
- Some religious ceremonies can never be celebrated by women. This limits their participation within faith communities.
- Some religious groups are biased with regards to marriages as they allow men marrying across different religions but limit women from marrying across other religions.
- Upon marriage, women are expected to embrace and often practice the religion of their husbands. This curtails a woman's FoRB rights.



**We need to work with women in our communities - to support them, empower them and involve them.**

*- Bothina Mohamed - Faith Actor, Sudan*



# Country Focus

## Kenya

**Actions:** Capacity building, Outreach programmes, Interfaith dialogues

**Challenges:** Radicalization of youth, politicization of religion, COVID-19 pandemic

**Recommendation:** Collaboration between state institutions and faith actors in promoting FoRB, More awareness on FoRB.

## Somalia

**Actions:** Advocacy to promote and implement FoRB laws and policies, trainings on FoRB.

**Challenges:** Religious networks not well established, bias by state actors against non-Muslims.

**Recommendation:** Address structural laws that continue to challenge the full promotion of FoRB. Establishment of strong religious leaders network of all sects. More awareness on FoRB.

## South Sudan

**Actions:** Capacity building, More engagements with youth and faith institutions.

**Challenges:** Political manipulation, inactive faith actors, unemployment.

**Recommendation:** Collaboration between state institutions, youth and faith actors in promoting FoRB, More awareness on FoRB.

## Sudan

**Actions:** Capacity building, More engagements with youth, women and faith institutions.

**Challenges:** Political manipulation, unestablished faith networks.

**Recommendation:** Collaboration with members from all faith communities to build peace and harmony.

## Tanzania

**Actions:** Interfaith dialogues, engagement with children on FoRB, capacity building.

**Challenges:** • Limited space for dialogue between members from different backgrounds, disunity among interfaith groups.

**Recommendation:** Collaboration with members from all faith communities to build peace and harmony.

## Uganda

**Actions:** Interfaith dialogue, engagement with policy makers, engagement with youth.

**Challenges:** Growing poverty levels leads to radicalization, political manipulation, violence against some faith groups.

**Recommendation:** Needed cordial relations between faith groups and state institutions, promote intergenerational dialogue, more awareness on FoRB.





# In Pictures







## Participants' feedback and looking ahead

- Need to establish a strong religious leaders network of all sects and minorities. This will be a perfect space for religious education and coexistence.
- The government should work with civil society and progressive faith actors to address structural laws that continue to challenge the full promotion of FORB in countries in the region.
- Interfaith dialogue programs should be strengthened in the countries within the region. Interfaith relations are a major tool for countering social challenges facing faith communities
- Teachers should be trained on FORB so that children from an early age can get to understand the value of co-existence.
- It emerged that many people are losing trust in faith actors and their ability to effectively stand for the people. This is because politicians have been able to infiltrate religious institutions by giving gifts to faith actors.
- Misuse and misinterpretation of religion and religious texts continues to be a serious threat to peace and stability in some communities.
- Faith leaders serve as intermediaries between the state and diplomatic missions to discuss religious freedom and freedom of speech. e.g, the US embassy brought together youth leaders and religious and community leaders to discuss local concerns around violent extremism related to religion and conflict in Tanzania.
- Attacks on places of worship is a big challenge in promoting FoRB.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly affected many countries including Kenya. Higher rates of poverty and unprecedented unemployment among young people are worsening the peace and security space in the region.

# What we take home



# What we leave here

## Reassuring

- Pio Ding - Norwegian Church Aid



Conversations around FoRB and social cohesion are very important in the region given the high levels of security challenges. I wish to thank faith actors for the courage to stand for the truth and for supporting their communities to overcome the ever-growing challenges which have recently moved from direct conflicts to climate catastrophes. It is encouraging to see faith leaders from different faith traditions standing together to address discrimination and injustices. The Norwegian Church Aid will continue to provide support where necessary for the wonderful work you are doing.





# About Us

**Arigatou International** is a global non-profit organisation which brings together people from all walks of life to build a better world for children. We have four initiatives: The Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), Ethics Education for Children, Prayer and Action for Children, and the Interfaith Initiative to End Child Poverty (End Child Poverty). Through these initiatives, our aim is to promote interfaith cooperation, peace building, nurturing spirituality and positive values in children, and ending child poverty and violence against children. Our headquarters are in Tokyo, with international offices in Nairobi, Geneva and New York.

The **Eastern Africa Regional Peace Programme** was established by the Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) and the nested partners in 2016. The RPP programme is being implemented by NCA and 6 regional partners based in Nairobi: Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa (FECCLAHA), Hekima Institute of Peace Studies and International Relation (HIPSIR), All African Conference of Churches (AACC), African Council of Religious Leaders (ACRL), International Center for Peace, Human Rights and Development (IPHRD), and Arigatou International (AI), who are facilitating the Regional Faith Leaders Forum (RFLF) and the Youth In Action (YIA).



# Faith Actors Promoting Social Cohesion and Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) in Eastern Africa

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