

5

YEARS OF
BUILDING
BRIDGES



The Courage to Stay



Rick van der Woud,
CEO Mensen met een Missie

It began quietly.
Under a tree that gave more shade than words could.
A few chairs stood uneven on the ground, tea cooling in cups that had been filled too early.
Someone spoke. Someone else stayed.
That was five years ago.
No banners, no headlines — just people, hesitant perhaps, but willing to meet.
And maybe that is how peace always begins: not with applause, but with the simple decision to remain seated when everything in you wants to leave.

From moments like these, JISRA was born — a partnership of faith-based and secular organizations and peacebuilders across seven countries, supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
Together, we set out to strengthen freedom of religion and belief, to open spaces for dialogue, and to transform division into connection.
In Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, and Uganda, people began to gather again — in mosques and churches, community halls and courtyards.
They listened across difference, questioned long-held assumptions, and slowly rebuilt trust. Women found their voices, young people created new narratives, and religious leaders built bridges where there had been walls.
But dialogue did not stop at the community level.
It travelled — from villages to councils, from local meetings to national ministries. Faith leaders met with local authorities, youth groups spoke with policymakers, and government representatives began to see dialogue not as a threat, but as a tool for peace.

Through policy dialogue and advocacy, JISRA helped ensure that lessons learned in small circles could influence systems that shape people's lives.
It was not easy.
At times it felt like carrying stones uphill — slow, invisible work.
But it changed those who did it. Because peace, we discovered, is not a destination but a practice — one rooted in trust, humility, and persistence.
We learned that freedom of religion or belief is not a policy paper or a resolution. It is the daily act of protecting one another's dignity, of creating space for what is sacred to others, even when it is not sacred to you.
It is the foundation of coexistence — the invisible architecture of a peaceful society.

And advocacy, too, begins there: not in declarations, but in proximity.
In the courage to stay close to what is fragile, and to keep the conversation alive when the world grows loud.
Now, five years later, the reports are written, but the work continues.
JISRA's networks remain active, partnerships endure, and lessons travel forward - into new initiatives, new collaborations, and the daily practice of dialogue.

This, to me, is JISRA's legacy:
a reminder that peace is not built in ministries or boardrooms,
but in the space between two people who decide to meet.
and that dialogue - from the smallest gathering to the international policy table
is still the most powerful way to defend our shared humanity.
We believe in a world where people talk, not fight.
It sounds simple.
It never is.
And that is exactly why it matters.

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Building Bridges for Peace and Freedom

The Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) is an interfaith partnership of more than fifty civil society organisations: Catholic, Islamic, Protestant, interreligious, and secular. Together, we worked across Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Uganda, Belgium, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the USA. The Arabic word Jisr means “bridge,” and it perfectly captured what we set out to do: build bridges between people and communities once divided by fear, inequality, or misunderstanding.

Funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Strengthening Civil Society, Power of Voices framework, we worked for five years to help build peaceful and just societies where everyone could enjoy Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB). Together with faith-based organisations, networks, and women’s and youth groups, we strengthened capacities, encouraged collaboration, and amplified inclusive voices and policies.

Our collective ambition was clear. We aimed to strengthen the voice of religious actors in civil society and protect civic space, to leverage their constructive role in high-level advocacy, to build stronger relations between interreligious spaces for peaceful societies, and to enhance the inclusion and participation of women and youth in promoting Freedom of Religion and Belief.

For us, Freedom of Religion and Belief was more than a right on paper. It meant the freedom to choose, change, or renounce a religion, to live without coercion, and to express one’s beliefs openly. Safeguarding this freedom required courage and balance, protecting both majority and minority rights while creating space for mutual respect. From the beginning,

we believed in the positive power of religion and the potential of those who carry its messages. By engaging religious leaders, women, and youth, we helped turn faith from a dividing line into a bridge for peace and strengthened inclusive participation and leadership across all levels of society.

Across all seven countries, we operated in contexts where civic space was shrinking. Restrictions took many forms, from limits on freedom of expression and association to tighter government controls, restrictive laws, political tensions, and insecurity linked to protests and conflict. These dynamics made advocacy, participation, and dialogue difficult. Yet we did not step back. We adapted. We organised smaller and safer forms of engagement, strengthened local dialogue, and improved security measures for our partners and participants. These adjustments allowed us to sustain peacebuilding and advocacy efforts even as the space for civic action narrowed.

We built partnerships grounded in trust. We worked hand in hand with traditional and religious leaders, from high-level clerics and imams to local pastors and teachers who guided their communities every day. Alongside them, we intentionally engaged

women and youth, challenging restrictive gender- and age-based norms and opening doors for their full participation in decision-making. We also collaborated with authorities and security actors at local, national, regional, and international levels to advocate for inclusive policies and ensure that governance reflected the voices of all citizens. Through this cooperation, we demonstrated that dialogue between faith and state was not only possible but could be transformative.

Women and youth were at the heart of these efforts, and many of the interfaith platforms we supported now continue independently

A central focus of our work was challenging harmful norms and stereotypes, particularly those that excluded women and youth, and confronting prejudices between religious and denominational groups. Across the countries where we worked, our partners led dialogues, workshops, campaigns, and community sensitisation to help people view one another with empathy and respect. Through faith literacy and inclusive interpretations of sacred texts, we worked alongside religious actors to

promote understanding, dignity, and equality.

In Nigeria, this approach helped shift norms around women’s leadership. Religious leaders began advocating for women’s inclusion in traditional council meetings, leading to the creation of women’s leadership structures. These efforts helped women gain the confidence to challenge forced marriages, female genital mutilation or cutting, and domestic violence, with the support of their religious communities.

In Indonesia, cultural revival became a path toward reconciliation. In Tokorondo village, Poso, residents came together for the first mass dero in decades, a traditional Pamona dance once banned due to rumours and fear. The revival, initiated by Muslim youth and approved after dialogue with Islamic leaders, drew more than a thousand participants and became a living symbol of restored trust and shared identity.

At the community level, we focused on bringing people together across faiths, traditions, and generations. Through workshops, interfaith sports competitions, women’s groups, and interreligious messages from local leaders, we helped strengthen relationships and nurture mutual

understanding. We supported the creation and growth of interreligious platforms where leaders and community members worked together to address shared concerns.

These spaces became hubs for dialogue and joint problem-solving, tackling issues from social exclusion to local conflict. Innovative approaches such as the Interfaith Experience, the use of art and education for Freedom of Religion and Belief, an informative bike tour along various religious buildings and sites, and initiatives on environmental safeguarding showed how creativity could build unity. Women and youth were at the heart of these efforts, and many of the interfaith platforms we supported now continue independently, carried forward by the trust and collaboration we helped to foster.

We also worked to strengthen conflict prevention and resolution. Religious leaders were trained to mediate disputes more inclusively and fairly, helping to restore relationships and strengthen social cohesion. In places where radicalisation and violent extremism posed a threat, we supported faith literacy, alternative narratives, and early warning systems that involved women and youth in identifying and addressing risks. In

Kenya, this approach helped rebuild confidence between communities and police. In Kwale and Tana River, police began to embrace alternative justice systems and recognise the value of religious leaders in dispute resolution.

5 years

across seven countries, we witnessed the power of collaboration, faith, and courage.

Through community policing dialogues, paralegal training, and gender desk forums, community members grew more confident in reporting and resolving issues. In Kilifi, the local police commander took the lead in promoting collaboration with youth to address marginalisation, insecurity, and religious extremism, demonstrating that partnership could shift even the most entrenched relationships. Advocacy was central to our mission. We engaged with authorities and security actors at all levels to open



dialogue and ensure that community voices shaped the laws and policies that affect peace and justice. At the international level, we ensured our partners' experiences reached global platforms. In July 2024, youth faith delegates from Indonesia, Mali, Kenya, and Nigeria represented JISRA at the UN High Level Political Forum in New York. Together, they hosted a side event titled Bridging Divides and Building Peace: Youth, FoRB, and the SDGs. The event connected Freedom of Religion and Belief with the Sustainable Development Goals and highlighted how young people across countries were advancing peace through inclusion and dialogue.

Learning was woven into every part of our work. Through the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, we organised Islam–FoRB communities of practice, including a session on Islamic principles of religious diversity. This process produced strategic recommendations and country-specific action plans to integrate the Marrakesh Declaration into national practice. Our academic partners, Utrecht University and the University of Groningen, conducted studies in Kenya, Indonesia, and Nigeria under the theme Reimagining Religion, Security,

and Social Transformation. These studies underscored the importance of localisation, contextualisation, and the critical role of religious actors in building peace. Their findings informed policy briefs, academic publications, and EU dialogues that provided grounded, context-sensitive recommendations for peacebuilding.

We also promoted collaboration across borders. From 2022 to 2024, partners in Indonesia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Kenya took part in their countries' UN Universal Periodic Reviews, ensuring that local experiences informed international human rights advocacy. A defining part of our approach was Participatory Grant-Making (PGM). Across all seven countries, we placed decision-making power directly in the hands of communities, particularly women- and youth-led groups, allowing them to design and implement their own interfaith initiatives. This approach strengthened local ownership and ensured that peacebuilding efforts were rooted in the priorities and leadership of the people themselves.

Over five years, across seven countries, we witnessed the power of collaboration, faith, and courage. We saw religion serve as a bridge instead

of a barrier. We saw women and youth take their rightful place as leaders and changemakers. We saw dialogue turn into trust, and trust into lasting cooperation.

As JISRA comes to a close, the bridges we built remain, carried forward by the communities, leaders, and networks that made this work possible. Together, we proved that peace grows stronger when everyone has a voice, and that Freedom of Religion and Belief thrives when it is lived, not only protected.

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Shaping a Shared Journey

Looking back over five years of JISRA, we can be proud not only of what has been achieved in the countries where we worked, but also of how we worked together. Bringing together more than 50 civil society organisations from different contexts was no small task. Yet through collaboration, patience, and a shared purpose, we built a partnership that functioned with remarkable harmony.

At the start, forming a consortium with four very diverse main partners was challenging. It might have been easier to go it alone. But as we committed to spending time together, listening to each other's ideas, experiences, and hopes for this FoRB programme, we discovered that our greatest strength lay in our diversity. Instead of insisting on doing things our own way, we learned to trust that collaboration would help us create something stronger and more meaningful than any of us could achieve individually.

Much of JISRA's success stems from the trust built among consortium partners. This trust was cultivated from the very beginning during the co-design process, where every organisation had a voice. Each partner invested not only in activities but also in relationships, dedicating time, staff, and resources at both country and global levels. This investment fostered relevance, ownership, and unity around a shared vision. It also allowed JISRA to remain flexible, adapting to each country's unique context while maintaining a common direction across national, regional, and global levels.

At the heart of JISRA was the conviction that sustainable change must be locally led. Local partners were not implementers of someone else's agenda; they were the drivers, shaping priorities, designing interventions, and guiding decision-making based on their own realities. Their leadership ensured that JISRA's work remained rooted in local contexts and that change would

continue beyond the programme itself. Equally important was our collaboration beyond the consortium. Throughout the programme, we worked closely with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch embassies, and other strategic partners who believed in the same goal of advancing Freedom of Religion or Belief. Each actor brought a different perspective and responsibility, whether from government, civil society, or faith-based organisations, yet we were united by a common purpose: building peaceful and inclusive societies. This spirit of partnership created an open space for mutual learning and joint reflection, strengthening both policy dialogue and local implementation.

JISRA was never a vanity project. Each partner brought distinct abilities and perspectives, and we recognised and valued these differences. When one organisation faced a challenge, others stepped in to offer support. Regular meetings, both virtual and in person, strengthened coordination, improved efficiency, and nurtured a shared identity that crossed organisational boundaries. More and more, we began to operate as one team.

Of course, there were moments when collaboration was tested. What made the difference was our willingness to bring issues to the table, to speak honestly, and to seek resolution together. This openness helped us grow stronger as a consortium, turning challenges into opportunities for learning and deeper cooperation. JISRA's consortium collaboration resembles a diamond: a beautifully

cut stone with many facets. Each facet is different, yet together they reflect light in dazzling ways. Similarly, each partner brought a unique angle, and together we created something vibrant, valuable, and whole.

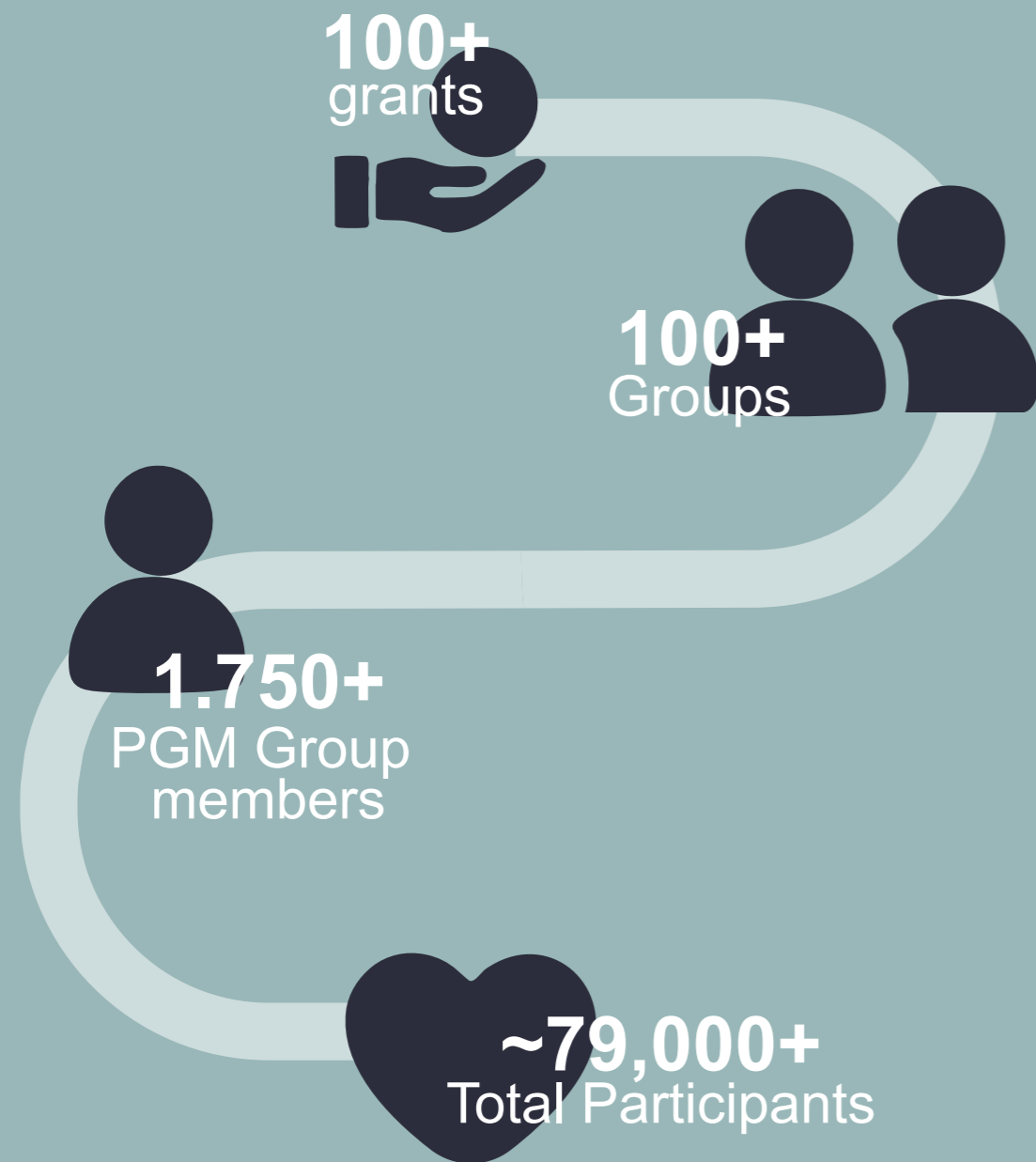
Perhaps the spirit of our collaboration is best captured in the words of one country coordinator:

“I often forget who works for which consortium partner or local organisation. To me, we are all one JISRA family.”



Shifting Power: Participatory Grantmaking

Interfaith football tournaments, joint clean-up of religious sites, community dialogues to address disagreements. Across JISRA countries, young people are finding creative ways to strengthen interreligious relationships in their communities. Yet many of them still feel excluded from decisions that affect their lives, especially within formal religious spaces often led by older men.



To change this, JISRA put funds directly into the hands of youth- and women-led groups across all seven countries. Through participatory grantmaking, grassroots actors themselves identified the issues that mattered most, designed their own initiatives, and decided which ones to fund.

What made this approach different was that power truly rested with the communities. "It was not the organisation having the solutions, but about the community identifying both the problems and the responses," explained one participant in Kenya. In Ethiopia, another added, "Decision-making on priorities is not individual but collective, involving all parties and reaching a suitable decision that serves everyone."

As groups collaborated across faiths, they began breaking down barriers that had long divided them. "Muslim and Christian associations decided not to compete, but instead to collaborate and submit joint project ideas," recalled a facilitator in Mali. "It aligned perfectly with our goal of peaceful coexistence."

The participatory grantmaking processes led to local initiatives that made a real difference. In Arsi Negele, Ethiopia, youth helped resolve disputes between communities divided over noise disturbances from religious

practices. In Kwale, Kenya, interfaith youth dialogues reduced intolerance and improved perceptions of young people. In Kirkuk, Iraq, a youth camp brought together Christians, Muslims, and Yazidis, helping participants, as one put it, "realise we could be the source of peace in our own communities."

"It was not the organization having the solutions, but the community identifying both the problems and the responses."

For many, participatory grantmaking also sparked deep personal transformation. "Before PGM, Christian and Muslim women never visited each other's places of worship," shared one Kenyan participant. "Now, we meet, share stories, and plan together." In Mali, a woman added quietly, "I entered a church for the first time through a PGM activity."

Beyond dialogue, these experiences built confidence and recognition. "Their coming together to organise and raise a proposal has empowered them to recognise their ability to analyse their own situation, develop solutions, and seek support for implementation," said a facilitator from Nigeria. Altogether, 108 youth- and women-led groups across seven countries reached

more than 2,000 people, not only designing and implementing projects themselves but also deciding which ones would be funded. "Women who did not dare to do that before now raise issues in meetings and are leaders in their denominations," reflected a Ugandan facilitator.

Participatory grantmaking became an experiment in power-sharing that proved transformative. "For the first time, we decided what change should look like in our own community," said a youth leader from Kenya. The process not only empowered communities to lead but also offered valuable lessons to partners on what inclusive decision-making can truly mean.

The Power of Voices

Across JISRA countries, engagement in the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) has become a milestone in connecting local realities to global human rights advocacy. The UPR, a peer review mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council, gives each country the opportunity to report on its human rights record and receive recommendations for improvement. For JISRA, it became much more than a reporting exercise; it became a bridge between faith, gender, and rights-based perspectives, ensuring that Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) issues were voiced by those most directly affected.

The journey began in Indonesia, where in 2022 JISRA partners launched the programme's first engagement with the UPR. They brought together a wide range of actors, including faith leaders, women's groups, human rights experts, and government representatives, to develop a civil society report on the status of FoRB in the country. "It was the first time so many of us sat at one table to talk about religious freedom," one partner recalled. "We realised how

powerful it is when civil society and faith actors speak with one voice."

This collaboration extended far beyond Jakarta. Diplomatic briefings were organised with ministries and embassies in partnership with other civil society networks working on broader human rights concerns. Later, a team of JISRA Indonesia partners travelled to Geneva for the UPR pre-session, coordinating closely with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

(OHCHR) and the permanent missions of various UN member states. Joining them was JISRA's IRCK from Kenya, who helped strengthen engagement with African member states.

The result was impressive. During Indonesia's UPR, 28 FoRB-related recommendations were presented by member states, 11 of which were accepted by the government. Following the review, JISRA Indonesia and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs agreed to

jointly conduct a mid-term review to assess progress, a rare and significant achievement. The process not only elevated FoRB within Indonesia's national dialogue but also inspired partners in other countries to adopt similar strategies in their own UPR engagements.

Elsewhere, JISRA partners took these lessons forward. Between 2022 and 2025, they strengthened their capacity to research, lobby, and monitor recommendations, ensuring that local realities shaped national and international discussions. Partners gathered evidence, facilitated consultations with faith leaders, women's and youth groups, and government officials, and developed joint FoRB reports. Coalitions were formed, voices united, and credibility deepened.

In Kenya, this collaborative approach led to the drafting of a national FoRB submission for the 2024 UPR, addressing issues such as radicalisation, religious profiling, tolerance in schools, and gender-based harm linked to cultural and religious practices. Their recommendations fed into Kenya's fourth UPR review, where the government accepted 232 of 339 proposals, including commitments to promote FoRB and prevent torture. For many partners, the experience was transformative. "Usually, we rarely meet directly with policymakers," one participant reflected. "Here, we could present our experiences, and they listened carefully."

A similar momentum unfolded in Ethiopia, where JISRA partners

"JISRA helped translate sensitive FoRB issues into language and evidence that UPR stakeholders could use."

submitted recommendations to promote interreligious dialogue, protect victims of FoRB-related violence, and counter hate speech. Their input was reflected in the OHCHR's Summary of Stakeholders' Submissions, after which the Ministry of Justice invited JISRA and other civil society actors to a national follow-up workshop to act on accepted recommendations. Since then, dialogue with ministries, faith leaders, and international missions has continued as an ongoing effort to turn commitments into reality.

The process also gained strength in Nigeria, where collaboration between JISRA and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) brought new energy to FoRB advocacy. Together, they demonstrated how FoRB could be embedded within the country's broader human rights framework while staying rooted in community realities. Jeffery Kurugh, Assistant Chief Human Rights Investigation Officer at NHRC, described JISRA's strength as "advocacy through inclusive dialogue and grassroots engagement," a process that amplified local voices and promoted accountability. For Hannah Urefe, also of NHRC, the UPR "brought Christians and Muslims together to promote peaceful coexistence and created space for women to take leadership roles in their communities."

Across all countries, the UPR became a living classroom. Partners exchanged lessons on structuring FoRB data, briefing diplomats, engaging ministries, and following up on recommendations. Though contexts differed, common challenges emerged, such as mistrust, shrinking civic space, and weak implementation. Yet learning together built solidarity, confidence, and greater recognition in international forums.

As Mimi Aledze reflected, the experience will "help promote greater understanding and respect for diverse beliefs at the community level" and

showed "how to frame FoRB within broader human rights work, making it easier to advocate for inclusive policies."

Through their collective efforts, JISRA partners proved that advocacy grounded in faith, evidence, and collaboration can reach the highest levels of global decision-making while keeping community voices at its heart.

"We realised how powerful it is when civil society and faith actors speak with one voice."



JISRA Partners

The JISRA programme is coordinated by four international consortium partners: **Mensen met een Missie, Tearfund UK and Tearfund Netherlands, Faith to Action Network, and Search for Common Ground.** The programme partners with **the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its embassies, and is supported by the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers.** A variety of partners implemented the programme in the seven focus countries, bringing together more than 50 organisations with diverse backgrounds and expertise. You can find all of our partners listed below.

Consortium Partners

[Mensen met een Missie](#)
[Faith to Action Network](#)
[Search for Common Ground](#)
[Tearfund](#)

International partners

[African Council of Religious Leaders \(ACRL\)](#)
[Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers \(NRTP\)](#)
[University Utrecht](#)
[University of Groningen](#)



Ethiopia

[Ethiopian Catholic Church Social and Development Commission \(ECC-SACO\)](#)
[The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus Development and Social Services Commission \(EECMY-DASSC\)](#)
[Ethiopian Interfaith Forum for Development Dialogue and action \(EIFDDA\)](#)
[Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church Development Commission \(EKHCDC\)](#)
[Ethiopian Orthodox Church Development and Inter Church Aid Commission \(EOC-DICAC\)](#)
[Ethiopian Mulu Wongel Amagnoch Church Development Commission \(EMWACDC\)](#)
[Ethiopian Muslims Development Agency \(EMDA\)](#)
[Ethiopian Muslims Relief and Development Association \(EMRADA\)](#)
[Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia \(ECFE\)](#)
[Iman Islamic Association \(IIA\)](#)
[Interreligious Council of Ethiopia \(IRCE\)](#)

Mali

[Islam Population and Development Network \(RIPOD\)](#)
[Movement of Christian Executives and Leaders of Mali \(MCRC\)](#)
[Youth with a mission \(JEM\)](#)

Iraq

[Women Empowerment Organization \(WEO\)](#)
[Peace and Freedom Organization \(PFO\)](#)
[INSAN Iraqi Society for Relief and Development](#)

Indonesia

[The Asian Muslim Action Network \(AMAN\)](#)
[Dian Institute / Interfidei](#)
[Fahmina Institute](#)
[Fatayat NU](#)
[Gusdurian](#)
[Imparsial](#)
[Mosintuwu](#)
[Muhammadiyah](#)
[Nasyiatul Aisyiyah](#)
[Peacegeneration](#)

Kenya

[Chemchemi Ya Ukweli \(CYU\)](#)
[Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics \(CICC\)](#)
[Inter-Religious Council of Kenya \(IRCK\)](#)
[Kenya Community Support Center \(KECOSCE\)](#)
[Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance \(KMYA\)](#)
[Muslims for Human Rights \(MUHURI\)](#)
[Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims \(SUPKEM\)](#)

Nigeria

[Catholic Agency for Overseas Development \(CAFOD\)](#)
[Development Initiative of West Africa \(DIWA\)](#)
[Dialogue, Reconciliation and Peace centre \(DREP\)](#)
[Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria \(FOMWAN\)](#)
[Rural Development counsellors for Christian Churches in Africa \(RURCON\)](#)
[Scripture Union of West Africa \(SUWA\)](#)
[Women's Interfaith Council \(WIC\)](#)

Uganda

[Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative \(ARLPI\)](#)
[Church of Uganda Teso Dioceses Planning and Development Office \(COU-TEDDO\)](#)
[Muslim Center For Justice and Law \(MCJL\)](#)
[Teso Religious Leaders' Efforts for Peace & Reconciliation \(TERELEPAR\)](#)
[Western Uganda Faith-Based Organisation Network \(WUFBON\)](#)



The Transformative Role of Religious Leaders

Across JISRA countries, religious leaders are guiding communities to navigate some of today's most complex challenges, from rebuilding trust after conflict to countering hate speech, exclusion, and violent extremism. Whether in churches, mosques, temples, or traditional councils, they are uniquely positioned to guide moral conversations, mediate disputes, and nurture reconciliation. Their voices reach deep into communities; their institutions, built on generations of trust, give them a platform to influence not only followers but also policy and public life.

Through JISRA, these leaders are reimagining what it means to lead in divided societies. They are not only spiritual figures but also bridge-builders, educators, and role models, demonstrating how spirituality and compassion can work hand in hand to heal divisions. Their influence extends from pulpits to parliaments, from small village meetings to national interfaith platforms, showing that faith-based peacebuilding is both a moral calling and a practical approach to coexistence.

Across diverse contexts, religious leaders are using their authority and the credibility of their institutions to address the root causes of conflict, opening spaces for dialogue, promoting gender equality, supporting youth leadership, and working side by side with governments to mediate tensions. These efforts are transforming the social role of religion itself, shifting it from a source of separation to a source of shared strength.

Freedom of Religion and Belief becomes visible in these everyday acts of leadership: when an imam and a priest co-chair a peace committee, when a bishop and a sheikh jointly address hate speech, or when a network of women of faith takes the lead in interreligious advocacy. Through their example, religious leaders are showing that faith, when guided by empathy and courage, can build the foundations for justice and peace.

At the Kita pilgrimage a priest and an imam addressed thousands together after performing a joint play on love, tolerance, and living together.

Ethiopia When tensions threatened Halaba, Muslim and Christian elders stood together and described themselves as guardians of peace. Their unity did more than prevent escalation; it gave rise to an interfaith forum with recognised standing, one that public authorities now call upon to mediate when disputes surface. This combination of community trust and institutional legitimacy has helped keep Halaba steady even as neighbouring areas faced unrest.

Elsewhere, congregations and councils became places to relearn how to live together. In Ziway, a priest grounded difficult conversations in the command to love one's neighbour, helping people see Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) as a value that protects faith rather than threatens it. In Adama, a Muslim elder revived shared Iftar meals, formed youth committees, and organised support for vulnerable families, his son's 2024 wedding becoming a city-wide sign that tradition and mutual respect can coexist.

A former military commander turned pastor now teaches reconciliation between communities, combining discipline with humility in awareness sessions that reach thousands. Across Dire Dawa and Hawassa, shared actions such as tree planting, clean-ups, and joint sessions on countering hate speech made collaboration visible, returning to a familiar verse about knowing one another and putting it to work.

These shifts also changed institutions. Women leaders built networks to advance gender equality within

religious spaces, moving from invitation to recognised leadership. In 2024, influential leaders including Orthodox, Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, and traditional authorities, as well as women and youth advocates and government representatives, convened for open dialogue and committed to work together in their localities. From that momentum, an Interfaith Advocacy Network emerged to connect zones, coordinate joint action, and engage media.

Voices from Kersa capture what this means in daily life. A local Muslim scholar recalls the time when intra- and inter-religious extremism set people against each other. Now, he says, it is normal for Christian and Muslim leaders to sit together, to eat and drink, and to carry lessons from one district to another, proof that peace grows through both relationships and structures.

These experiences reflect a broader pattern across JISRA countries, where religious authority, when used with humility, becomes a source of healing and cooperation.

Mali Across Mali, religious leadership moves both people and systems at once, from pulpits and studios to councils and pilgrimage grounds. In Sévaré, a senior pastor used his standing within the evangelical umbrella body to bring together church leaders across the region for dialogue on doctrine, public witness, and social cohesion. He convened large forums, encouraged a shared orientation on peace, and opened channels that had long been closed

between congregations. In Mopti, the interfaith consultation and dialogue framework became a public force for coexistence. Messages on tolerance and Freedom of Religion and Belief aired across local radio stations; listeners called in to say barriers had lifted, and at the Kita pilgrimage a priest and an imam addressed thousands together after performing a joint play on love, tolerance, and living together. The Ministry of Religious Affairs welcomed the initiative and encouraged replication, a sign that spiritual authority and public authority can reinforce each other when leaders choose cooperation.

In Bamako, a well-known radio and television presenter has become a household name for peace. His programme, once confined to his own religious community, now

welcomes guests from different faiths to discuss everyday issues such as family conflict, forgiveness, respect, and coexistence. Through his calm tone and storytelling, he invites both Muslims and Christians to see themselves in each other's struggles.

Listeners have called the show to share how it inspired reconciliation within their families or communities. One message summed it up simply: "Your words helped me call my brother again after a year of silence." By turning the airwaves into a shared moral space, he demonstrates that faith-based communication can heal divisions as powerfully as sermons or scripture.

Institutional reform is also strengthening trust from within. The High Islamic Council in Mopti adopted an annual plan and budget, improving

management and relations with both the faithful and the state. Catholic dioceses in Mopti and San introduced computerised parish accounting after national validation of governance modules, ensuring transparency and accountability in church administration. When social media controversies around December festivities risked inflaming tensions, interfaith leaders and umbrella organisations moved quietly through proper channels to calm rhetoric, facilitate apologies, and reaffirm Mali's tradition of religious cohesion.

When they choose cooperation over competition, faith becomes not a dividing line but a bridge connecting communities.

"Now it is normal for Christian and Muslim leaders to sit together, to eat and drink, and to carry lessons from one district to another."





“I was ready to walk away from everything. But the words I heard at the interfaith meeting about peace, about mercy, held me back.”

- Aly Ahmad, Quranic scholar, Timbuktu, Mali

Together, these actions show why religious leaders matter in Mali. They convene, mediate, teach, broadcast, reform, and reassure. Their moral authority reaches hearts, while their institutional strength makes peace durable, turning belief into a public good that communities can trust.

Uganda In Owiny-Agule parish, Kateta sub-county, a dispute over who should slaughter meat for sale fractured everyday life. Christians objected to the prayers recited by Muslims; Muslims experienced the criticism as an attack on their faith. Separate slaughter sites and eating places emerged, and even a Muslim-led water project was rejected by some Christians as covert conversion. Religious leaders stepped in. They convened reconciliation meetings, reminded communities of constitutional commitments to freedom of belief and mutual respect, and encouraged followers to recognise one another’s rights and traditions. Shared eating places returned, Muslims continued to slaughter, and the water project was once again embraced, an everyday conflict transformed through pastoral authority and the power of dialogue.

This same spirit of leadership was visible in Kalaki District, where religious leaders and women from different faith groups came together for an interfaith learning visit at a local mosque. What began as an exchange of experiences became a moment of shared reflection on peace, equality, and the value of diversity. Through discussions, prayer, and joint activities, the participants reaffirmed their common responsibility

to treat one another with love and respect. Such initiatives, from interfaith visits to sports and community dialogues, are strengthening local bonds and showing that diversity, when embraced with empathy, can become a source of unity.

Further north, in Yumbe District, reconciliation took a different form. After years of tension between two Muslim factions, quiet mediation supported by the Muslim Centre for Justice and Law (MCJL) helped restore trust and cooperation. Former rivals began to work together on community projects and educational activities, supported by local authorities who recognised the wider impact of peace within faith communities. Their collaboration has since inspired others, proving that humility, dialogue, and shared purpose can heal long-standing divisions.

Across Uganda, these examples reveal how religious leaders act as moral guides and mediators, drawing on their theological authority and institutional trust to restore relationships and promote peaceful coexistence. When they choose cooperation over competition, faith becomes not a dividing line but a bridge connecting communities through shared values of respect, compassion, and peace.

These examples reveal how religious leaders act as moral guides and mediators, drawing on their theological authority and institutional trust to restore relationships and promote peaceful coexistence.

"This is more than a programme, it's a movement"

In Plateau State, Nigeria, where religious conflict has torn apart entire communities, Dr. Rhoda Udanyi, an Anglican minister, has committed her life to healing those divides. As a key partner in the JISRA programme, she brings together Christian and Muslim communities not just in dialogue, but in action. Here, she shares her story, in her own words.



Dr. Rhoda Udanyi, Anglican minister,
Church of Nigeria, Bukuru Diocese

I've spent years working in communities fragmented by religion, where mistrust runs deep and peace efforts often fall flat. In Nigeria, it sometimes feels like we go in circles from dialogue, conflict, attempted reconciliation, and then back to the start. But something changed with the JISRA programme. This time it felt different. This time it felt like we touched the soul of the people through faith.

From within

JISRA invited us, as religious leaders, to engage our communities from within our own belief systems. That, to me, was revolutionary. We didn't come preaching to each other. Instead, Christian leaders spoke to Christians, and Muslim leaders spoke to Muslims, using our own sacred texts to promote peace. And people listened. I remember one session where a Muslim leader read a verse about peaceful coexistence. A participant stood up and said, "We've never heard this in the mosque." That moment struck me. It made me realize that sometimes, the teachings of peace are there, but they're not being taught.

"Today, that same community holds dialogue sessions every two weeks. They've gone three years without conflict. When it's a Christian holiday, Muslims attend. When it's a Muslim celebration, Christians join in."

Healing

One community we worked in had been completely divided: Christians lived on one side, Muslims on the other. You couldn't walk safely from one to the other. But after studying our scriptures and holding honest dialogues, people began asking: Why have we let it get this far? They didn't wait for outsiders to fix things. They took action themselves, calling in community leaders, identifying threats, and rebuilding trust. Today, that same community holds dialogue sessions every two weeks. They've gone three years without conflict. When it's a Christian holiday, Muslims attend. When it's a Muslim celebration, Christians join in. They are now even building a shared community hall, with support from the Dutch government through JISRA's participatory grant-making scheme. That's not just development, it's healing.

Personal

JISRA has also deeply impacted me personally. I began to look more critically at my own scriptures: What do they say about peace? About freedom? About the "other"? I realized we sometimes behave in ways that contradict what we claim to believe. This programme gave me the courage and the platform to change that – not just in words, but in action. It also gave me perspective. For so long, I thought my community was the only one being mistreated, the only one suffering. But when I heard the stories of others, I saw that we had also caused pain. That understanding opened the door to reconciliation not just tolerance, but genuine healing.

Shared sacred ground

One powerful example still stays with me. A Muslim group began constructing a mosque in a Christian-majority area, without seeking permission. Tensions rose. In the past, it could have sparked national violence. But this time, religious leaders stepped in. We didn't argue, we listened. And we agreed: every person has a right to worship. In the end, the entire community helped build that mosque together. Today, it stands not as "their mosque," but "our mosque."

Challenges

Of course, challenges remain. Surrounding communities that haven't experienced this programme still struggle with conflict. Sometimes people flee into our peacebuilding communities for safety. And youth, especially unemployed youth, are still vulnerable. We've made progress in including women in traditional leadership spaces, but it's only a start. There's much more to do. Still, I believe the success we've seen is possible because faith was central. Too many programmes shy away from religion. But in Africa, faith matters. People will listen to religious leaders. And now, we are giving them something different to hear.

What gives me hope is the sincerity I've seen. When we visit these communities, people welcome us with cultural dances and open arms. They've taken ownership. They've seen the change, and they don't want to go back. For me, this isn't just a peacebuilding initiative - it's a movement. One that must grow. One that must continue. Because when we engage people through their faith, grounded in freedom, dignity, and love, transformation is not only possible - it's inevitable.

"I thought my community was the only one being mistreated, the only one suffering. But when I heard the stories of others, I saw that we had also caused pain."

Practising Patience

The JISRA programme has brought together faith-based organisations, women, and young people to strengthen trust and promote peace. Dutch Special Envoy Freedom of Religion and Belief, Bea ten Tusscher has closely followed this journey. She has witnessed partners counter extremism, foster interfaith cooperation, and nurture new leaders. In this interview, she reflects on inspiring moments, JISRA's impact, and lessons for governments.

What has been the most inspiring or memorable moment in your journey with JISRA?

"One of the most memorable moments for me was during a side event at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. Several Kenyan organisations presented their work with young people and faith-based initiatives to counter extremism. I especially remember a charismatic woman who spoke with incredible power about how she helped boys and young men stay away from extremist groups. She drew on moral values, on religion, but also simply on being present and offering alternatives.

What struck me most was the energy and hope she embodied. Despite all the challenges, she continued to believe her efforts could make a difference. I saw the same resilience in other JISRA partners, for example in Indonesia, where young people and women kept pushing forward despite adversity. Witnessing their determination made me realise: if you are looking for hope, you need to look to the Global South. In Western Europe, we have lost some of that resilience."

Looking back, what do you see as JISRA's most significant achievements?

"What JISRA has achieved above all is building trust between religious communities. That might sound abstract, but it translates into very concrete changes. I often think of an example from Ethiopia. In one village, electricity was only available for four hours a day and only for Muslims, not

for Christians. Young people from both communities refused to accept that. Since they grew up together, played sports together, and went to school together, they decided to approach the mayor jointly. Eventually, electricity became accessible to everyone.

These small-scale examples are actually very powerful. They prove that collaboration at the local level works. Change does not always need to be large-scale or dramatic, it often starts small and grows from there. For me, that is one of JISRA's greatest achievements: showing how trust and cooperation can lead to tangible results."

How do you see the role of faith-based organisations evolving in global peacebuilding?

"I am convinced their role will remain, and even grow. Around 85 percent of people worldwide are religious. Faith gives meaning, which makes faith-based organisations indispensable in peacebuilding. They speak the language of communities and therefore play a vital role in preventing and resolving conflicts.

I have also worked to promote religious literacy, so that policymakers develop a deeper understanding of how religion influences societies. If we ignore these actors, we miss huge opportunities to be effective. The human search for purpose is universal, and I believe the role of faith-based organisations in peacebuilding will only become stronger in the future."

What can governments, such as the Netherlands, learn from JISRA's approach?

"The main lesson is patience. Peacebuilding cannot be confined to a strict five-year project cycle. It takes time and requires flexibility. We Dutch like to work in a linear way, but in other contexts the path is often less straightforward. Sometimes you end up in a different place than you planned, and that can be valuable.

It is also about listening. Not telling communities what to do, but discovering together what they consider important. That requires dialogue on an equal footing.

Finally, governments can learn from JISRA's focus on women, youth, and minorities. Democracy is not simply the rule of the majority; it is about protecting minorities. JISRA demonstrates that when their voices are heard, a fairer and more sustainable foundation for peace emerges. That moral compass is at the heart of JISRA's work, and it has inspired me throughout my forty-year career."

"Around 85 percent of people worldwide are religious. Faith gives meaning, which makes faith-based organisations indispensable in peacebuilding."

"If you are looking for hope, you need to look to the Global South."

- Bea ten Tusscher

Dutch Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion and Belief





Women and Youth Building Peaceful Societies

Across JISRA countries, women and young people are entering spaces that for a long time were shaped without their participation. With the support of JISRA partners and religious actors, they are beginning to take part in conversations and decisions that matter, in churches and mosques, in youth groups and village councils, online and offline. In doing so, they show how Freedom of Religion and Belief is not only a principle set down in policy, but something that can be lived out in daily life.

This change is not only visible in villages and towns. In March 2025, a delegation of fifteen women faith leaders from JISRA travelled to New York for the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69). Standing alongside governments, UN agencies, and civil society, they demonstrated how religion and gender justice can go hand in hand. Their stories of challenging harmful practices, mediating conflicts, and reinterpreting sacred texts through a gender-just lens captivated audiences and shifted perceptions of what faith leadership can mean. For many of the women, the experience was also one of solidarity: “Now I no longer feel alone,” one participant said, capturing the strength of connection and the power of being heard on the global stage.

Freedom of Religion and Belief becomes tangible in everyday moments of participation and trust-building. It is present when a woman steps forward in her congregation, when youth form peace committees or create digital counter-narratives, and when women’s groups come together to save, support one another, and defend rights. Women and youth are opening doors to participation, while partners and religious actors walk alongside them to sustain these changes. In this way, local steps grow into broader movements, savings groups becoming interfaith alliances, forums evolving into associations, and community voices reaching international spaces. Freedom of Religion and Belief is not only affirmed in principle but practised in daily life, as traditions shift and communities learn to live together more justly and peacefully.

“Everyone could contribute equally, without one side dominating. Policymakers and youth spoke on the same level, and every voice was heard.”

Indonesia Across Indonesia, young people are increasingly navigating online spaces that can fuel misunderstanding and division. Social media platforms, while powerful tools for connection, are also used to spread hate speech, recruit followers into extremist groups, and intimidate activists. Yet these same spaces can become arenas for dialogue and positive change when young people are equipped to lead.

In September 2025, more than thirty youth from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia gathered in Indonesia for a Cross-Country Youth Exchange on Digital Safety and Human Rights. Hosted by JISRA partners including the Gusdurian Network, PeaceGen, and Interfidei, the exchange brought together young leaders who had seen firsthand how online radicalisation affects their communities. Over ten days, they shared strategies to turn digital fear into digital resilience, learning how to create counter-narratives, promote empathy, and advocate for digital rights.

For many, it was their first time engaging directly with government officials. Together, participants and policymakers drafted the Asia–Africa Youth Declaration on Digital Safety and Human Rights, calling for stronger digital literacy, gender equality online, collaboration with tech companies, and investment in youth-led peacebuilding. One of the strongest outcomes was the network it created: Nigerian participants plan to adapt Indonesia’s game-based peace education, while Burundian and Congolese youth will link their media collectives with Indonesian partners

to amplify alternative narratives. As one Indonesian participant reflected, “Everyone could contribute equally, without one side dominating. Policymakers and youth spoke on the same level, and every voice was heard.” These global connections build on work already taking place at home. Earlier in the programme, an online youth gathering in Indonesia brought together 66 young people from across the country to exchange experiences of interfaith collaboration and Freedom of Religion and Belief. Many went on to start initiatives in their own communities, showing how youth leadership can turn digital spaces into arenas for coexistence.

Alongside these youth-led initiatives, Indonesian women of faith are also fostering dialogue in tangible ways. Through Indonesia Berdialog, women leaders facilitated discussions across eight cities on issues such as discrimination, reintegration of survivors of terrorism, and gender-based violence. These dialogues not only transformed community relations but also inspired national ministries to adopt similar approaches in counselling and empowerment programmes.

Iraq In Sheikhan, northern Iraq, the shadow of conflict and displacement has long strained the relationships between diverse religious groups. Mistrust and isolation were deeply rooted, especially in remote villages like that of 22-year-old Yazidi graduate, Lehat. “My perspective has changed radically,” he reflects. “I used to look at other religions in a stereotypical way, but now I see the human commonalities that unite us.”

Like many of his peers, Lehat grew up with a stereotypical perspective of other faiths, believing that religion was fundamentally a source of division rather than a bridge. This environment of suspicion created significant community problems. Yazidi youth often felt isolated, struggling to see a meaningful role for themselves in civil society or in dialogue with their neighbours, particularly after the trauma inflicted by ISIS. This isolation hindered community-wide efforts toward reconstruction and peaceful coexistence.

Lehat’s perspective began to shift after he attended a JISRA-supported academic forum. This was not just a discussion; it was a critical turning point that provided him with tools and motivation, specifically an evidence-based understanding of the historical roots of religious diversity and shared

civic responsibilities in Iraq. The forum gave him the academic framework to challenge his preconceived notions and the psychological safety to step out of his isolation. This knowledge spurred him into action. What started as small volunteer tasks, such as translating, reporting, and helping to organise interfaith events, gradually transformed into leadership. The change occurred because the forum directly addressed his core issues: it replaced his stereotypical perspective with informed understanding and countered his isolation with tangible opportunities for engagement.

Today, Lehat serves on the Sheikhan Peaceful Coexistence Committee, where he sits alongside elders and even the mayor to advocate for youth and minority rights. Lehat’s journey of overcoming isolation and stereotype has had a ripple effect. Inspired by his

example, other Yazidi youth have begun to step out of isolation, participating in dialogues and joint initiatives with neighbours of different faiths, actively chipping away at the lingering mistrust in the region.

In a region where mistrust and isolation have long prevailed, the actions of Lehat, empowered by shared learning and opportunity, are reshaping what interfaith cooperation looks like, creating new and sustainable pathways for peace.

“I used to look at other religions in a stereotypical way, but now I see the human commonalities that unite us.”



Annisa Rizkyta, JISRA Cross Country Learning participant.



3rd from left: 22-year-old Lehat.

One Sunday, Helen stood before her congregation and said aloud what many had whispered: "women, too, have the right to serve as leaders."

Ethiopia In Dodola town, Ethiopia, Helen Shemelis had always been passionate about the role of women in her church. But women were never allowed to lead. After joining JISRA's training on gender reconciliation, Helen decided she could no longer remain quiet. One Sunday, she stood before her congregation and said aloud what many had whispered: "women, too, have the right to serve as leaders." The church agreed, and Helen became the first woman pastor in Dodola. Her appointment not only changed her own life but also opened a door for others. Women began speaking up more in church meetings, and young girls saw new possibilities for themselves.

At the same time, change was unfolding at a collective level. The Women of Faith Network was relaunched with representatives from Christian, Muslim, and Bahá'í traditions, creating a platform for women across faiths to speak with one voice. The network not only defended women's rights, but also worked to counter religious exclusion in families and communities. Through persistence, Alfiya Kassim, a Muslim woman who faced rejection from her Christian in-laws after marrying across faiths, showed how patience and goodwill could repair trust. In bringing together women of different traditions, the network demonstrated that inclusion was not an isolated act but a shared responsibility.

New youth leaders were emerging as well. Meseret Tadesse, a young Ethiopian who had been involved in violent protests after the killing of musician Hachalu Hundessa, completely transformed after JISRA's training on nonviolent communication.

She became known as an "Ambassador of Peace" for mediating conflicts in her school. Across Ethiopia, such stories show how women and youth are finding new ways to lead.

Uganda In Bugiri District, the Katwisanye Women's Group was once divided. Christian and Muslim women eyed each other with suspicion, their meetings tense and unproductive. Then, through JISRA's participatory grant-making support, they received training in peaceful coexistence and collective action.

Trust slowly grew. The women began saving and farming together, supporting each other's businesses. Their unity soon had ripple effects in the wider community. When a 16-year-old girl, Shakira, was about to be married off, the group intervened. They convinced her parents to cancel the marriage and helped her return to school. What began as a small savings group became a force for change, not only improving livelihoods but also protecting rights and inspiring other villages to follow their example.

Another remarkable story is that of Musoga Nasur. Once caught in addiction and despair, he was identified by his imam and encouraged to join JISRA's mentorship programme. With guidance, he turned his life around and rose to become a youth leader. Today, Nasur mobilises his peers to reject hateful language, prevent substance abuse, and embrace respect across religions. His journey from addiction to leadership has become a model for other young people, showing how second chances can transform not only an individual but also the outlook of an entire community.

The women began saving together, supporting each other's businesses. Their unity had ripple effects in the wider community.





Supported by a network of faith leaders, Josephine and her colleagues have led campaigns that not only protect women and girls but also reshape community attitudes toward accountability and care.

Kenya In Tana River County, Mariam Ali's childhood was shaped by practices like female genital mutilation and early marriage. Married at 14, widowed young, and inherited by her brother-in-law, she once defended these traditions as part of her culture. That began to change when she joined JISRA's women's reflection forums. Listening to others, she realised the harm these practices caused.

At first, Mariam spoke only in whispers. But her confidence grew. Today, she is a recognised advocate against female genital mutilation (FGM) and serves on the county anti-FGM committee. Her leadership is not only symbolic; she works directly with religious leaders, women's groups, and youth to raise awareness and prevent harmful practices. By linking her personal journey with broader community campaigns, Mariam has helped shift conversations once dominated by silence into open discussions about rights, faith, and protection.

Her courage is echoed by Rev. Josephine Kambua in Nairobi's Embakasi area. A survivor of sexual violence, she has mobilised women of faith to raise awareness and prevent sexual and gender-based violence in informal settlements. Supported by a network of faith leaders, Josephine and her colleagues have led campaigns that not only protect women and girls but also reshape community attitudes toward accountability and care. Her work demonstrates how women of faith can draw on shared values to address deep-rooted violence in society.

Along the coast, interfaith camps gave young people the tools and confidence to lead. Many returned home to

mentor peers and form small peace clubs, showing how a single experience of dialogue can grow into lasting community initiatives.

“We discovered we share the same challenges. Now we work hand in hand.”

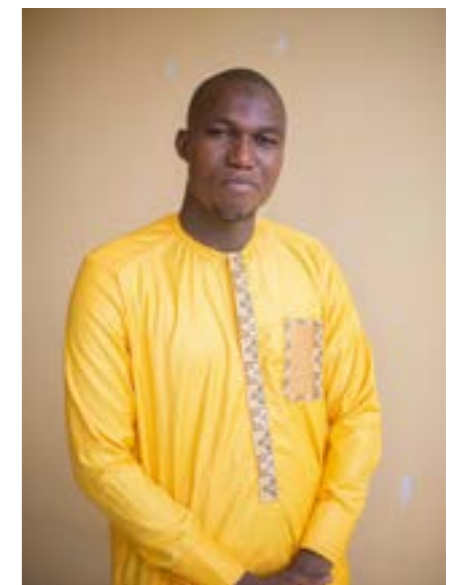
Mali In Timbuktu, Mohamed Mansour Cisse once held prejudice against Christians. As president of a Muslim student league, he saw little reason to collaborate with people of other faiths. That changed when he joined JISRA's interfaith trainings, where imams and pastors shared stories of common struggles and hopes.

Mohamed reached out to Christian peers, and together they founded a youth interfaith association, a groundbreaking step in a region where Christians are a minority. The group now organises dialogues and campaigns to counter extremist narratives. “We discovered we share the same challenges,” he says. “Now we work hand in hand.”

Women, too, are taking bold steps. In 2024, with support from JISRA, the Réseau des Femmes de Foi was established under the Interreligious Council for Peace and Social Cohesion in Mali (CIP-Mali). The network brings together Muslim, Catholic, and Evangelical women to strengthen advocacy for peace, social cohesion, and Freedom of Religion and Belief. Structured with a rotating leadership, its first president is an Evangelical woman, supported by a bureau of nine members representing the different faiths. The women identified common challenges and committed to joint

advocacy, showing how interreligious solidarity can be built from within faith communities. As one participant reflected, the process was not only about organising but also about recognising that women of different faiths share a responsibility in shaping a culture of peace.

Such initiatives are part of a wider movement. Before the constitutional referendum, a national youth gathering brought Muslims and Christians together to debate secularism and Freedom of Religion and Belief, showing that young leaders can influence national debates as well as local relations. Across Mali, interfaith forums, youth associations, and the new Women of Faith Network are turning suspicion into cooperation and exclusion into inclusion.



Mohamed Mansour Cisse, president of a Muslim student league.

Nigeria In Zaruma community, Plateau State, women were historically excluded from decision-making, with leadership positions reserved for men. With support from JISRA, local women began advocating for inclusion. Their efforts led to the appointment of a woman leader, Constance Onye.

Constance's impact was immediate. She insisted that women's perspectives be heard on issues like substance abuse, family welfare, and community safety. Soon after, fifteen more women were appointed to leadership roles, from committee members to community representatives.

Their presence changed the way problems were approached, discussions began to address household stability, education for girls, and youth protection. "The inclusion of women has brought a different yet productive approach to solving problems," Constance explains. Other women and youth followed.

Martha Isa joined a savings and loans group and regained confidence through farming. Mariam, a young activist, organised interfaith gatherings of women to challenge gender-based violence. Young activists also organised football matches and education campaigns that united divided communities.

In Kaduna and Jos, youth trained by JISRA established interfaith peace committees that worked with religious leaders to resolve disputes, promote tolerance, and organise community events such as sanitation drives and education campaigns. These initiatives are expanding the circle of who gets to lead, decide, and shape society.

Across all seven countries, these stories share common threads. Change often began with a small step: a woman daring to speak in church, a youth choosing dialogue over violence, a group saving together. Those steps carried ripple effects that reshaped communities, shifted norms, and inspired others to act.

Savings groups became platforms for interfaith trust. Sports fields became arenas of reconciliation. Women's networks and schools became launchpads for leadership. Youth-led associations and peace committees became seeds of interreligious solidarity.

The contribution of women and youth to peaceful societies is not symbolic. It is practical and transformative. They are opening doors that were once closed, breaking cycles of violence, and showing that peace is possible when everyone has the chance to participate.

"Understanding the threat of radicalism, polarization, and hate speech in the digital world for young people is very important. Developing youth resilience through intercultural networking, digital peace promotion, and creative engagement is key to designing innovative strategies for peace and digital security."

— Marc Gerritsen, Dutch Ambassador to Indonesia during the JISRA Cross-Country Learning Youth Exchange



Five Years of JISRA in Numbers

The data presented here tells the story of five years of collective effort to advance Freedom of Religion and Belief. Behind each number lies collaboration across countries and regions, between communities and partners, showing how shared commitment turned ideas into action. It reflects the campaigns that sparked change, the initiatives that took root, and the cross-country exchanges where people came together to learn from one another and build lasting connections.

Key numbers

56 Partners

60+ Regions

11 Countries



Local and National Reach

60+ regions in 7 implementing countries



Awareness Through Campaigns

35+ large scale on and offline campaigns



Cross Country Collaboration

20+ in-person cross-country partner events



International Impact

worked at international platforms including AU, EU, UN and ASEAN



Inclusivity

worked with 14+ different faith communities



Religious Minorities Reclaiming Space

Across diverse communities, people of minority faiths are stepping into spaces that for a long time were shaped without them. With the support of local partners and religious actors, they are beginning to take part in conversations and decisions that matter, around sacred forests and county offices in Kenya, and in streets, schools, and public celebrations in Kirkuk, Iraq. In these moments, inclusion is not only a principle written in policy; it is something lived in daily life.

For too long, religious minorities have felt the sting of exclusion, misunderstood, silenced, and treated as outsiders. In Kenya, the ancient traditions of the Kaya elders risked erasure as they were banned from their sacred forests and unjustly labelled as practising witchcraft. In Kirkuk, Kaka'i and Bahá'í youth grew up hearing that their faith marked them as different, navigating stigma and invisibility. This kind of othering creates divisions that undermine peace and limit community development.

Inclusion, then, is not an abstract ideal. It is an urgent necessity for building resilient and cohesive societies. This reflection looks at how practical steps such as dialogue, clear procedures, interfaith engagement, and youth and women's leadership can make a tangible difference. Drawing on experiences from Kenya and Iraq, it shows how targeted initiatives, including those supported by JISRA, can help communities move past historical divisions, foster understanding, and open doors to participation. When all voices are recognised and valued, unity does not rely on sameness; it grows from shared responsibility and everyday acts of trust.



“Before these inclusion efforts, we were seen as witches.”

Kenya In the heart of Kwale County, where ancient traditions meet modern pressures, the Kaya Mrima community set out to reclaim its heritage. For years, elders struggled to access the revered Mrima Forest for worship and cultural practice.

Unclear protocols and a power struggle with the Kenya Forest Service created distance and mistrust, heightened by fears that investors would encroach on sacred land after a valuable mineral was discovered. The community felt its spiritual home was at risk, and relations between elders, the Kenya Forest Service, and the Community Forest Association deteriorated.

Dialogue shifted the course. Mohammed Jumadari, secretary of the forest association, recalls a pivotal meeting where stakeholders sat together. The Kenya Forest Service, initially wary, listened to the elders' intentions, a straightforward desire to worship. Understanding followed, and with it, receptiveness to access.

“We got to learn of the appropriate channel in requesting to access the Kayas with ease,” Mohammed shared. Since then, the elders have performed worship three times in the forests, unhindered and accompanied by security from the Kenya Forest Service, a notable change.

The approach extended beyond Mrima. In Kwale County, Kaya Diani elders used peacebuilding and conflict transformation skills to host community dialogues, addressing issues such as juvenile gangs and creating safe spaces for collective solutions. Local organisations supported these efforts, and elders were even asked to help mediate a conflict in Kilifi involving Kaya Fungo, a sign of growing trust.

Institutional steps reinforced the shift. Kaya Diani representatives now sit within the County Commissioner's

peace structures and the National Government's decision-making frameworks. This recognition provides a platform for their voices and affirms cultural heritage within formal governance. Working with partners like KMYA through interfaith networks, they also addressed misconceptions, including unfounded claims that Kaya members sheltered juvenile offenders. By engaging across faiths, representatives have helped reshape public perceptions and strengthen social cohesion.

The Kaya elders used peacebuilding and conflict transformation skills to host community dialogues, addressing issues such as juvenile gangs and creating safe spaces.

The change is felt at a personal level. In the past, Kaya members were often misunderstood and unfairly labelled as practising witchcraft. A Kaya Diani member recalls: “Before these inclusion efforts, we were seen as witches. I joined the Kaya group in 2012 while working as a hotel supplier. Shortly afterward, members of the Tumaini Committee asked me to leave, saying that my association with Kaya made me seem like a witch. I was forced to step away from the committee.” Today, through interfaith engagement and community awareness, such views are slowly giving way to recognition and respect.

Women and youth are also taking up leadership. The Kaya women's cultural group secured a grant to purchase a 100-seater tent, supporting income-generating activities and community events. With increased visibility and participation in JISRA activities, they were invited to perform at the Chenda Chenda cultural celebrations, an indication of wider acceptance and

influence. The Kaya experience shows that steady dialogue, clear procedures, and shared responsibility can repair trust and allow traditions to flourish alongside peace and inclusion.



Kaya elder and secretary general to Kaya Diani, Kwale County.

“The divisions within our Kaka'i community have held us back for too long. Through dialogue and collaboration, we can break down these barriers and build a future where every layer of our community feels united and empowered.”

— Arwin, Kirkuk, Iraq

Iraq In Kirkuk, a city known for its diversity, a different pathway to inclusion emerged. National Costume Day, full of colour and tradition, became more than a celebration; it was a deliberate effort to bring people together. From the outset, Kaka'i and Sabian-Mandaeans helped shape the plan. Seeing these communities wear their traditional dress signalled that they belonged and that their stories were part of Kirkuk's larger narrative.

The gatherings encouraged conversation and learning. Neighbours explored each other's religions and customs, and older misunderstandings began to soften. Young Kaka'i and Bahá'í, in particular, found their voice through art, drawing and painting to challenge stereotypes and express identity. Local activists from minority groups played a central role, working from the grassroots to connect communities.

Challenges remained. Kirkuk has been marked by division, and trust can be fragile. Some worried that inclusion might be symbolic rather than structural. Beyond public events, minorities still faced barriers to participation in jobs,

business, and social groups. A difficult history and concerns about safety sometimes limited engagement. At the same time, minority communities worked to preserve culture and faith in the shadow of larger groups.

For change to last, inclusion needed to move into policy, education, and daily routines. This meant addressing root causes of inequality, advocating for fair laws, equal opportunities, and protection from discrimination, supporting minority leadership, and investing in youth programmes. Dialogue groups, where people could listen and be heard, helped reduce stereotypes and build empathy.

Measuring progress involved more than counting events. Communities looked at whether attitudes were shifting, discrimination was declining, and representation was growing. Youth creativity, seen in art initiatives, became a catalyst. With support to build critical thinking, empathy, and advocacy, young people could carry the work forward. Durable change, however, had to be community-led, with outside support enabling rather than directing. Beyond cultural appreciation, these

efforts also needed to uphold legal and human rights for religious minorities, ensuring safety and full participation in Kirkuk's future.

“The divisions within our Kaka'i community have held us back for too long. Through dialogue and collaboration, we can break down these barriers and build a future where every part of our community feels united and empowered,” says Arwin from Kirkuk, Iraq.

A shared thread runs through these experiences. Change often begins with a small step: a clear access pathway to a sacred forest, a seat at a local peace structure, or a community celebration designed with minority voices at the table. From there, dialogues widen, perceptions shift, and participation grows. Inclusion becomes visible not only in events but in everyday decisions, and with it, the foundations of peaceful, cohesive societies become stronger.



Change begins when we recognise each other's humanity

In the rich religious and cultural diversity of Ethiopia, Honelegn Berhanu, from a Christian organisation, and Nejat Medhi, affiliated with a Muslim organisation, have worked closely together within the JISRA programme.



Honelegn Berhanu, Tearfund Ethiopia (left)
Nejat Medhi, the Ethiopian Interfaith Forum
for Development, Dialogue, and Action (right)

What began as a formal collaboration has over the years grown into a deeper form of trust, dialogue, and shared vision. Together, they reflect on what the programme has brought to their communities, and to themselves.

As local implementing partners, we've learned that lasting change doesn't start with external solutions. It starts with trust, relationships, and honest dialogue rooted in local realities. JISRA has been more than a programme; it is a journey that continues to challenge, connect, and transform us.

Local leadership

JISRA in Ethiopia operates through a consortium of twelve local organisations, coordinated by Tearfund Ethiopia and Faith to Action Network. Tearfund Ethiopia leads the consortium and compiles national reports for the global JISRA team. This structure fosters coherence, accountability, and collaborative learning. But what makes this collaboration truly effective goes beyond coordination is that it lies in the depth of relationships. Our engagement is both practical and personal. Through annual workshops, joint monitoring visits, and regular updates, we've built genuine teamwork across geographic distances.

Space to learn

One of the consortium's greatest strengths is the space it creates for mutual learning. Each year, partners come together to reflect, share challenges, and exchange ideas. These gatherings have become essential platforms for breaking silos and moving forward as one community. Challenges have emerged. The absence of a local office for one international partner has sometimes complicated coordination, and unclear roles initially caused confusion. However, through open communication and shared commitment, we've clarified expectations and strengthened our collaboration.

From within

What makes this work so impactful is that we are not outsiders, we are part of the communities we serve. We live within the same traditions, tensions, and networks of trust. This gives us both access and responsibility to engage with sensitive issues like religious intolerance, gender inequality, and the exclusion of women and youth from religious leadership. JISRA's impact has been both collective and personal. One notable moment was a youth-led interfaith dialogue where young Muslims and Christians spoke openly about being talked about but rarely listened to. With JISRA's support, they led conversations on scripture misuse and barriers faced by women in religious spaces — challenging us all to question the norms we often accept.

Stronger together

This spirit of reflection has reshaped how we collaborate. In a context where team culture is not always the norm, JISRA has taught us to share resources, support one another, and pursue peace together. Not as competitors, but as allies. We've moved from isolated efforts to united action. Women and youth have especially gained new opportunities. Cross-

“To our international partners and donors: transformation cannot be imposed. It must be nurtured from within, through local ownership and long-term commitment. What we need most is continued support and the space to lead this work in our own way, with our own voices.”

country exchanges and capacity-building have built leadership skills and confidence, revitalising local structures and helping ensure no one is left behind. We now move forward with renewed energy and purpose.

Inclusive engagement

Our engagement with stakeholders - from local religious leaders to national policymakers - has also matured. Through regional and international collaboration, we've implemented more inclusive, responsive projects that reflect the real needs of our communities.

There have even been symbolic breakthroughs. One such moment was when an imam and a priest - neighbours who hadn't spoken in years - co-hosted a community dialogue. Not because they were asked, but because they saw its value. These are the moments when transformation becomes tangible.

Time and commitment

We know, however, that sustainable change takes time. Ethiopia continues to face political instability, social fragmentation, and inequality. The progress we've made is real, but fragile. That's why this work must continue beyond the current five-year programme. The seeds of peace have been planted, now they need time and care to grow.

To our international partners and donors: transformation cannot be imposed. It must be nurtured from within, through local ownership and long-term commitment. What we need most is continued support and the space to lead this work in our own way, with our own voices.

JISRA is no longer just a programme to us. It has become a way of life. And if we've learned one lasting truth, it is this: Peace begins when we recognise each other's humanity — especially when we differ.



Local Voices in the Fight Against Violent Extremism

Across many JISRA countries, the threat of violent extremism continues to cast long shadows over communities. The challenge is complex and deeply rooted in questions of belonging, opportunity, and faith. Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) therefore goes far beyond security responses; it is about building trust, fostering inclusion, and creating the social foundations for peace.

One of JISRA's strongest lessons has been that meaningful change begins at the local level. When PCVE and Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) initiatives are localised, when communities themselves help shape, implement, and monitor them, they become far more effective. This approach has taken shape in countries such as Kenya and Indonesia, where national strategies have been translated into county and provincial action plans that bring religious actors, youth, and civil society into the heart of prevention.

In Kenya, violent extremism remains a major security threat, fuelled by youth unemployment, social marginalisation, and weak governance, particularly in coastal and northern border regions. The Somalia-based Al-Shabaab group continues to exploit these vulnerabilities through targeted attacks and recruitment drives. In response, the Kenyan government has developed national and county-level prevention strategies, supported by partners such as the UNDP and the European Union, to build community resilience and address the underlying causes of radicalisation.

In Indonesia, violent extremism has persisted despite a period of relative calm between 2023 and 2025. The drivers are different yet familiar: distorted religious interpretations, socio-economic grievances such as poverty and alienation, and an increasing wave of online radicalisation. Here too, collaboration between government and civil society through the National Strategy to Counter and Prevent Violent Extremism has created new opportunities for prevention rooted in dialogue, education, and community engagement.

Through JISRA, partners have continued to advocate for stronger government engagement and public awareness on PCVE, to empower youth to participate in decision-making and policy dialogue, and to use religious platforms to raise awareness among faith actors of their role in prevention, particularly through the accurate interpretation of sacred texts and by promoting social cohesion. Efforts have also focused on strengthening coordination between different actors and ensuring that policies are localised and implemented effectively at every level.

“I used to feel like the fight against extremism was happening around me, not with me. Now, I carry the message. I help others see that we can be the ones who protect our communities.”

Kenya At just twenty-six years old, Rama Hajj, a fisherman from Msambweni in Kenya’s Kwale County, had already seen how extremism tears at the social fabric. His days began before dawn at sea, but his nights were haunted by the memories of friends who had vanished, lured by false promises of belonging and purpose. The tension in his community was palpable: suspicion, silence, and fear had become everyday companions.

“There were times I felt completely invisible,” Rama recalls. “Workshops were held, government officers came and went, but no one ever asked how it felt to live here, in this fear.”

Like many young people and women in Kwale, Rama felt doubly marginalised, first by poverty and lack of employment, and then by systems that spoke about them but not to them.



Rama, a fisherman from Msambweni in Kwale County.

The County Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (CAP-PCVE) existed on paper, but few at the grassroots level knew what it meant, let alone that they were meant to be part of it.

That changed when Rama attended a series of community outreach meetings organised by JISRA. For the first time, he encountered the CAP not as a policy document but as a tool for real action. He learned about its pillars, understood the role of community prevention, and began to see where young people like him fit in. “I had never even seen the CAP before,” he admits. “But when I understood what it meant and that we have a role in it, I knew I had to do something.”

Armed with knowledge and conviction, Rama began sharing what he had learned. He organised informal meetings with his peers, spoke at village gatherings, and used his local networks to turn the CAP into a living conversation. Drawing inspiration from the plan’s ideological pillar, he led dialogues that unpacked extremist narratives and promoted trust. “I now talk to my friends and neighbours about the CAP,” he says. “I help them see that it’s not just for the government. It’s for us too, our protection, our future.”

His leadership did not go unnoticed. Rama was later invited to join a local working group charged with translating the CAP into action. The group now organises community outreach and interfaith dialogue sessions that engage young people before extremist ideologies do. Rama’s story is a reminder that knowledge, once shared,

can transform entire communities. What began as a personal awakening has rippled outward into a collective movement. The CAP, once viewed as distant and bureaucratic, is now alive in the conversations of youth, women, and families in Msambweni. “I used to feel like the fight against extremism was happening around me, not with me,” Rama reflects. “Now, I carry the message. I help others see that we can be the ones who protect our communities.”

With programmes like JISRA bringing the right tools into the right hands, Rama is no longer invisible. He stands as a self-made leader, building a safer Kwale for himself, his neighbours, and the family he hopes to raise.

Kenya & Indonesia From 26 January to 3 February 2025, JISRA partners from Kenya and Indonesia came together for a peer-to-peer cross-country learning exchange on localising PCVE strategies and strengthening the role of civil society. The exchange brought together policymakers, faith leaders, and security experts, including Kenya’s National Counterterrorism Centre (NCTC) and Indonesia’s National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT), to explore how national frameworks could be transformed through community-driven action.

For many participants, the event marked the first time that civil society and policymakers sat at the same table as equal contributors. “Usually we rarely meet directly with policymakers,” one participant shared. “Here, we could present our experiences and they listened carefully.”



Participants engage with an interactive gamification tool during the cross-country learning in Indonesia.

“We rarely meet directly with policymakers. During this exchange we could present our experiences, while they listened.”

- Spageon Ngabo,
participant learning exchange

The week-long programme deepened collaboration and culminated in plans to formalise cooperation between the two countries through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Participants shared practices, challenges, and innovations in tackling violent extremism from the ground up.

One of the clearest takeaways was that localisation is key. Both Kenya and Indonesia demonstrated that when national strategies are adapted to local realities, they yield more sustainable results. Kenya’s County Action Plans, which integrate grassroots actors into county-level PCVE work, were identified as a good practice that other countries could replicate.

Another important insight centred on the role of women. The exchange highlighted that women are not only victims of violent extremism but can also act as enablers or recruiters. This nuanced understanding is vital when designing intervention programmes. Indonesia’s approach, which formally includes women in national PCVE policy discussions, offered valuable lessons for Kenya.

Participants also addressed the growing challenge of online radicalisation. Technology and social media have become key arenas for recruitment, particularly among young people. Both countries shared creative responses such as digital storytelling and youth-led media campaigns. Indonesia’s

experience stood out for its innovation in integrating counter-radicalisation messages into online gaming, a model that sparked great interest among the Kenyan delegation.

Economic vulnerability emerged as another shared concern. In both contexts, extremist groups often exploit financial hardship to recruit followers. In Indonesia, some recruiters even promise to pay off debts, while in Kenya, the effects of climate change and displacement have left young people with few opportunities and growing frustration. Participants agreed that addressing economic insecurity must be part of any serious PCVE strategy.

Through joint lobbying and advocacy, the peer-to-peer initiative strengthened ties between civil society and government institutions in both countries. Lessons from Kenya underscored the success of localised county action plans that include women and youth, while Indonesia’s funding mechanisms, human rights-centred law enforcement, and inclusion of women religious leaders such as female Ulamaa and clergy offered models for more equitable participation.

Both countries are now incorporating innovations such as gamified PCVE messaging, technology-based monitoring and evaluation systems, and early warning and response mechanisms. As part of this collaboration, the NCTC and BNPT are finalising a structured MoU to deepen cooperation.

Reflecting on the exchange, Assistant County Commissioner Shunet from Kwale noted: “From this programme I have learned a lot in terms of localisation of strategies, local resourcing, and innovative approaches to PCVE. As a state actor, I will now work more effectively in coordinating state and non-state actors to accelerate implementation of our National PCVE Strategy and County Action Plan for Kwale. The exchange came at an opportune time as Kenya revises its national framework, and these insights will help us operationalise it down to the village level.”

Indonesia Polarisation and extremism are increasingly playing out in digital spaces. Around the world, an estimated 2.32 billion people engage in online gaming, and more than 80 percent of internet users play games regularly. In Indonesia, a 2024 poll revealed that 44 percent of gamers had encountered extremist recruitment or propaganda content online.

Recognising the power of gaming as both a risk and an opportunity, JISRA partner PeaceGeneration (PeaceGen) developed a creative approach to transform what was once a space for radicalisation into a space for peacebuilding. The initiative turned the “gamification of extremism” into the “gamification of peace.”

Gamification, the use of game elements and principles in non-game contexts, taps into people’s intrinsic motivation to learn and change. PeaceGen designed both online and offline games that require young people to collaborate with peers from different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds in order to win. Through gameplay, participants experience how prejudice and competition lead to loss, while cooperation and empathy generate shared success.

After five years of implementation in schools and youth programmes, the results are striking. Eighty-two percent of participating teachers and students reported an increase in empathy and critical thinking, while seventy-five percent went on to become gaming mentors for their peers.

The impact goes beyond statistics. Through gaming, youth discover diversity not as an abstract concept but as an experience. They learn to create their own campaigns, to tell their stories, and to see peace as something they can shape with their own hands. As one participant put it, “In these games, you don’t just play to win, you play to understand.” Sometimes, it turns out, the most powerful way to teach peace is to play it.

Roots of Resilience

Since joining the Human Rights division at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2024, Julia Munsters has closely followed JISRA's final phase. During her first field visit to Kenya, she witnessed how young people and women of faith take ownership in peacebuilding and how interfaith cooperation creates trust and resilience.

In this interview, she reflects on what impressed her most, the challenges of communicating JISRA's impact, and her hopes for the future of faith-based peacebuilding.

Over the past year, what has been the most inspiring or memorable moment in your journey with JISRA?

"Without doubt, my field trip to Kenya. I had only just started in my role and had been reading reports at my desk in The Hague, struggling to picture how activities translated into local realities. Then I saw it first-hand.

I met young people actively involved in peace committees, creating safer communities and engaging in dialogue with youth from other faiths. Their sense of ownership really struck me; these were grassroots initiatives led by young people themselves.

I was also impressed by the Women of Faith network. Female religious leaders from different communities shared openly about their successes and challenges, encouraged one another, and brought lessons back into their communities. Seeing both youth and women's leadership in action made JISRA tangible. Behind the reports, there is real ownership and pride at the community level."

Looking at JISRA as a whole, what do you see as its main challenges and success factors?

"One of the biggest challenges has been making outcomes visible. Because

JISRA works in very different contexts, results emerge at many levels; sometimes through legislation, other times through community dialogue or preventing violent extremism. Such qualitative impact is not always easy to capture.

This is why I believe a magazine like this is valuable. Storytelling makes the impact tangible, not only for the wider public but also within the Ministry.

As for success factors, JISRA's cross-cutting approach has been key. It links freedom of religion and belief to gender equality, youth participation, and even climate. I recall a reforestation initiative that brought religious communities together, addressing environmental concerns while strengthening interfaith cooperation. This holistic approach makes the programme more relevant and effective."

What can governments, such as the Netherlands, learn from JISRA's approach?

"The first lesson is to put freedom of religion and belief more at the centre of our diplomatic and development work. Too often the religious dimension is overlooked, perhaps because it feels unfamiliar in a secular country like the Netherlands. But ignoring it means missing crucial dynamics.

JISRA shows how FoRB can be an entry point to advance gender equality, counter violent extremism, and strengthen resilience. Another lesson is patience. In Kenya, I saw how

trust between partners took years to build. The inception phase allowed relationships to grow, and that has paid off. For governments, it's a reminder that building trust cannot be done in short cycles."

What is your hope for faith-based organisations and initiatives like JISRA in the future?

"My hope is that there will continue to be space and resources for this important work. Political momentum for human rights and development cooperation seems to be declining globally, and that is worrying.

At the same time, I hope communities themselves can build on what has been achieved. In Kenya I saw peacebuilding structures that were strong and inspiring. Long-term, what matters most is that the seeds planted can keep flourishing, with or without JISRA."

"Their sense of ownership really struck me; these were grassroots initiatives led by young people themselves".

"Ignoring religious dimension means missing crucial dynamics."

- Julia Munsters

Policy Officer, Ministry of Foreign Affairs





Confronting Harmful Narratives through Religious Literacy

Harmful norms and practices are rarely isolated customs. They are deeply rooted in patriarchal structures, gender inequality, and social hierarchies that stretch across cultures and religions. What is often described as “harmful traditional practices” gains legitimacy because it is framed as a moral or religious obligation. This perception makes such practices resilient, even when they contradict human rights. Left unchallenged, these norms reinforce exclusion, feed cycles of violence, and weaken the foundations of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB).

Faith, culture, and tradition are closely interwoven. Harmful practices can therefore be both justified and rejected on religious grounds, depending on who interprets the text or leads the community. Scholars and practitioners increasingly stress that overcoming such norms requires engaging faith rather than dismissing it. Faith leaders can be both gatekeepers and allies, depending on whether they reinforce or challenge prevailing interpretations.

This perspective resonates strongly with JISRA’s findings. Baseline studies revealed that low religious literacy — the inability to distinguish between authentic religious teaching and harmful cultural custom — is a major driver of exclusion. Practices that restrict women, silence youth, or stigmatise minorities are often defended as the “correct” way of practising religion. The pathway to change lay in strengthening inclusive religious literacy: helping communities interpret their own traditions critically, recognise manipulation or misinterpretation, and reclaim values of dignity, peace, and coexistence at the heart of faith.

Across JISRA countries, this approach took many forms. Young people questioned exclusionary sermons, clerics denounced hate speech, and women drew on scripture to claim their rights. Together, they show how religious literacy can become a bridge toward more inclusive expressions of FoRB.

Joint community visits to religious sites challenged norms of separation, while advocacy efforts addressed hate speech and promoted mutual respect between neighbors.

Uganda In many Ugandan communities, women continue to face discrimination and exclusion. Their participation in decision-making and leadership within faith settings is often limited by low literacy, poverty, and entrenched male-dominated traditions. Patriarchal structures reinforce stereotypes and restrict women's agency, while harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, gender-based violence, child and forced marriage, bride price, honour killings, witchcraft accusations, and forced conversion in interfaith marriages threaten their rights and safety.

Efforts to challenge these practices frequently encounter resistance from husbands, community members, and leaders who prefer traditional approaches. At the same time, legal and policy environments can reinforce harmful norms, for example through proposals to lower the legal marriage age for girls or impose harsh penalties related to sexuality.

JISRA partners in Uganda addressed these challenges by combining advocacy, media, and dialogue with capacity-building for women and youth. Radio programmes, sports messages, posters, and sermons shared inclusive religious messages that questioned the legitimacy of harmful practices and the exclusion of women from leadership. Community sensitisation meetings and intra-faith dialogues created safe spaces to discuss barriers such as lack of childcare or sanitary facilities that limited women's participation. Alongside empowering women, the

programme invested in transforming masculinities. Dialogue groups and awareness sessions engaged men and boys to reflect on patriarchal traditions, question gender stereotypes, and recognise the benefits of women's leadership for the community. Male allies played an active role, supporting women in calling out gender-based violence and challenging harmful practices.

These strategies led to visible results. Women assumed positions as wardens, parish council leaders, and mission coordinators. Women faith actors publicly opposed gender-based violence and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation. Interfaith women's savings groups built solidarity across divides. Resistance persisted, but the joint advocacy of women and supportive men showed that patriarchal norms were beginning to shift toward more inclusive participation in faith and community life.

Iraq Harmful norms and narratives in Iraq often take the form of sectarian and interfaith tensions. These are deeply embedded in many communities and fuelled by entrenched biases and the weight of historical conflict. Tensions appear both within and between religions. Discrimination and distrust can divide members of the same faith into sectarian camps, while interreligious relations are marked by suspicion, prejudice, and sometimes violence.

Narratives of "othering" reinforce boundaries, portraying certain groups

as outsiders or threats. Extremist movements exploit these divisions, framing violence as legitimate. For minorities, the consequences are particularly severe: exclusion, restrictions on practices, or social reprisals such as honour-based violence when community norms are transgressed. Political instability, including contested elections and power struggles, deepens these divisions and undermines dialogue. For young people, the erosion of trust and social cohesion fosters alienation and makes them more vulnerable to radicalisation.

To counter these dynamics, JISRA partners in Iraq worked to foster trust and cooperation across religious and ethnic lines. Their strategies combined intra- and interfaith dialogues, advocacy campaigns, tolerance training for teachers, and youth engagement. Joint community visits to religious sites challenged norms of separation, while advocacy efforts addressed hate speech and promoted mutual respect between neighbours. These initiatives created important spaces where Christian, Muslim (Sunni and Shia), Yazidi, and Kaka'i leaders could address prejudice and find common ground.

The results were meaningful. Kaka'i leaders joined interfaith forums for the first time, while diverse delegations attended Yazidi ceremonies at Lalish Temple. Acts of solidarity, such as a Muslim woman visiting her Yazidi friend during fasting, illustrated how personal relationships can break down stereotypes. Sermons in Kirkuk began to affirm diversity, and tolerance training gave educators tools to counter extremist rhetoric in schools. Youth groups jointly condemned acts like Qur'an desecration, showing the potential of collective responses.

Interfaith collaboration also became institutionalised. Advocacy forums and campaigns promoted mutual respect, the Erbil Religious Diversity Conference gave national visibility to dialogue, and the government in Al-Shekan approved the first officially recognised Religious Council for Peace, bringing

together Islamic, Christian, and Yazidi representatives. Challenges remain, but the creation of councils, working groups, and new narratives from pulpits and classrooms demonstrates that harmful sectarian norms can be addressed through religious literacy and cooperation.

Nigeria Across Nigeria, harmful norms and traditions also limit the role of young people in public and religious life. Gerontocratic traditions often exclude youth from decision-making, casting them as passive and inexperienced, while formal religious structures reinforce this exclusion by reserving leadership roles for older generations.

At the same time, young people are highly vulnerable to harmful practices such as child labour, trafficking, and early or forced marriage. The erosion of trust between generations can leave them feeling alienated and, in some cases, drawn to extremist narratives that present violence as an outlet for grievance. Ironically, the term "radicalisation" is sometimes used to dismiss youth activists who challenge entrenched norms.

The joint advocacy of women and supportive men showed that patriarchal norms were beginning to shift toward more inclusive participation in faith and community life.



Dialogue groups engaged men and boys to reflect on patriarchal traditions, question gender stereotypes, and recognize the benefits of women's leadership for the community.





JISRA partners in Nigeria prioritised youth inclusion by deliberately integrating young people into planning, decision-making, and community activities. Local partners applied the Peer Horizontal Network Formation approach, bringing together youth with shared identities such as gender to exchange knowledge, offer mutual support, and promote social learning.

By creating safe spaces for dialogue, investing in leadership capacity, and encouraging inclusive interpretations of faith, JISRA helped shift perceptions and practices that once seemed immovable.

Training sessions targeted both male and female youth, and governance structures were redesigned to include youth representatives. Participatory Grant-Making gave young people direct responsibility for developing and implementing ForB-related initiatives, while safe spaces, sports events, and mentorship opportunities connected them with role models and civic knowledge. These interventions produced tangible change. Youth gained roles in community structures,

with some communities deliberately appointing women and youth to leadership positions. Awareness raised through JISRA encouraged young leaders to promote broader participation, integrate women into decision-making, and support pluralism. In Kaduna and Plateau States, youth co-organised town halls, led PGM projects on hate speech, and collaborated across faith divides. Christian and Muslim youth leaders even united their community vigilante groups to improve local security.

Interfaith “Shayi groups” and football matches helped normalise cooperation and build trust among youth from different backgrounds. Youth leaders worked with elders to address drug abuse and crime, creating joint community action plans. This engagement increased ownership and sustainability. Young people became effective communicators, spreading ForB messages among peers and amplifying outreach. By 2024, youth participation in JISRA activities had increased by more than 40 percent compared to 2021, reflecting stronger community commitment to inclusion.

Overall, youth shifted from being passive bystanders to active peacebuilders. They tackled issues such as drug abuse, crime, and harmful

practices, and modelled resilience and coexistence in their everyday lives. Though progress was uneven, these outcomes showed that when youth are supported to exercise religious literacy and resilience, they can reduce exclusion and foster inclusive community life.

JISRA’s experience demonstrates that harmful norms and narratives, whether patriarchal, sectarian, or rooted in youth exclusion, are not fixed. The programme combined three mutually reinforcing approaches: strengthening religious literacy, broadening participation of women and youth, and building trust across sectarian and interfaith divides. By creating safe spaces for dialogue, investing in leadership capacity, and encouraging inclusive interpretations of faith, JISRA helped shift perceptions and practices that once seemed immovable. Resistance has not disappeared, but opportunities for participation and inclusion have expanded.

Harmful practices have lost some of their legitimacy, and communities have become more resilient. The result points to a cultural shift in which faith traditions are increasingly reinterpreted as resources for equity, coexistence, and the protection of ForB.



Building Bridges that Last

As the JISRA journey comes to an end, what remains is more than a record of activities or achievements. It is the story of people who dared to build trust across divides: faith leaders who chose cooperation over competition, young people who turned dialogue into action, and communities that discovered their shared strength in diversity. Across countries and traditions, JISRA has shown that peace is not a moment in time but a growing process — a bridge built through relationships, understanding, and courage. Its legacy lives in those who will continue to strengthen and walk that bridge long after the programme ends.

“We must invest in the energy and faith of young people.”



Lawyer and community leader Nasik Mustafa Safar Darwish.

In Iraq, lawyer and community leader Nasik Mustafa Safar Darwish, a member of the Kaka'i religious minority, has seen how trust and cooperation have replaced fear and misunderstanding. As part of JISRA, she served on the Religious Steering Committee in Kirkuk, working to strengthen coexistence between diverse faith groups. “Dialogue is no longer just a slogan,” she says. “It has become a tangible reality and a way of living together.”

Through JISRA, her community moved from conversation to collaboration. Interfaith activities now engage young people, women, and families, building shared citizenship and mutual care. “Our meetings have evolved into joint activities that serve all parts of society,” she explains, “helping everyone see that peace benefits the whole community.”

Moderate religious leaders have also gained a collective

voice against hate speech and extremism, giving space to discourse rooted in peace and justice. “We used to fear speaking up,” Nasik adds. “Now we speak together, and that unity gives strength.”

For her, sustaining this progress means embedding coexistence in daily life, in schools, youth centres, and religious spaces. “We must invest in the energy and faith of young people,” she says. “If they learn early on that diversity is not a threat but a blessing, then peace will endure.”

Beyond her work in Kirkuk, Nasik continues this mission through a network of women lawyers and activists offering legal aid and awareness on religious freedom, and through the Association of Scholars Supporting Peace, a group she helped establish with eleven religious leaders and academics from different faiths. They meet regularly to promote peace, counter hate speech, and

encourage dialogue, especially in times of tension. Through these efforts, Nasik ensures that JISRA's bridges of trust remain strong and open for others to cross.

In Mali, religious scholar and educator Sheik Salah Haidara shares this same sense of hope. As part of JISRA, he served as secretary in charge of collective initiatives within the consultative framework of religious leaders in Bamako and worked as a trainer in interfaith and intra-faith dialogue programmes across Bamako, Timbuktu, Mopti, Gao, and Ségou. “The project helped establish mechanisms of consultation and understanding among religious leaders of different sects,” he explains. “We now have an interfaith peace committee that makes it possible to talk before conflict escalates.”

From Bamako to Timbuktu, religious leaders trained through JISRA have learned to mediate conflicts, promote tolerance, and

strengthen peaceful coexistence. “Religion belongs to God, and the homeland belongs to everyone,” he says. “When we remember this, there is no space for hatred.”

After JISRA, Sheik Salah continues to train young imams and teachers through his madrasa network, embedding tolerance in education and nurturing the next generation of faith leaders. As first vice president of the National Council for Arabic Language and Islamic Studies, he also advances rational religious discourse and rejects violent rhetoric, ensuring that JISRA's consultative frameworks remain active and influential. “The role of government is to empower, not to control,” he notes. “When authorities listen to religious leaders who speak for peace, society becomes stronger.”

Civil society connects these efforts to communities, a triangular cooperation between faith actors, state institutions, and citizens that allows peace

“For indeed, with hardship comes ease.”



Religious scholar and educator Cheick Salah Haidara.

to take root. “Only when all three move together,” he says, “can peace truly grow.”

The road ahead will not be without challenges. Extremism, inequality, and injustice continue to test communities. Yet, as Nasik reminds us, “Our shared humanity and desire to live in peace are stronger than any other force.” Quoting the Qur’an, Sheik Salah adds, “For indeed, with hardship comes ease.”

Across seven countries, JISRA’s legacy endures in the people, systems, and relationships it helped to reshape. What began as a consortium has evolved into a network of allies united by shared values, partners who bring those lessons into new spaces, from local councils to international forums.

Faith leaders continue to work across divides to ensure peace in their communities. The interfaith peace committees established under JISRA are now trusted spaces for consultation and mediation, strengthened through governance and management skills, and able to engage authorities, resolve disputes, and nurture harmony.

Women and youth, too, are taking the lead. Through leadership and advocacy training, they have gained skills and confidence to take part in decision-making. Their presence is transforming conversations in meetings with governments and religious councils, and on community platforms. Among them, the

Women of Faith Network stands out as a lasting legacy, women who have become mediators and peace negotiators, visible nationally and internationally.

Many of JISRA’s most impactful initiatives now belong fully to the communities that created them. Youth peace clubs, interfaith dialogue groups, and village savings associations have become self-sustaining. Their sustainability lies not in funding but in collective ownership and community pride, proof that peacebuilding thrives when local voices lead.

Through engagement with ministries and civil society, Freedom of Religion and Belief has become more visible as part of peace and human rights agendas. In Uganda, Kenya, and Indonesia, education ministries are integrating religious freedom and inclusivity into curricula, while security actors are shifting toward more preventive, community-based approaches.

The programme’s advocacy legacy also continues through partners involved in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, ensuring human rights commitments translate into tangible action.

As JISRA concludes, the responsibility to carry this work forward rests with all of us, communities, faith actors, and partners alike. The call now is to keep freedom of belief alive and to continue building societies where diversity is embraced

as the foundation of peace.

The bridges built through JISRA connect communities, institutions, and hearts. As Nasik and Sheik Salah remind us, peace is not an endpoint but a living process, one that requires care, courage, and constant repair. These bridges may need maintenance; they may need strengthening. But they endure.

The bridge remains. And the responsibility to keep it open, strong, and welcoming now rests with all of us.

May we continue to build bridges strong enough for others to cross and wide enough to welcome everyone.



Credits

This magazine was developed to mark the conclusion of the **Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA)**, celebrating **five years of collaboration across seven countries to strengthen Freedom of Religion and Belief and build lasting bridges for peace.** Our deepest gratitude goes to all local partners, faith leaders, youth and women's groups, and community members who shared their stories and made this journey possible.



Concept and Coordination

Mensen met een Missie
Faith to Action Network
Tearfund Netherlands and Tearfund UK
Search for Common Ground

In collaboration with

Over 50 partner organisations across Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, and Uganda.

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Special thanks to

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Julia Munsters
Nasik Mustafa Safar Darwish
Nejat Mehdi
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Special thanks to

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its embassies for their continued trust, partnership, and commitment to advancing Freedom of Religion and Belief around the world.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Across seven countries, the Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) brought together people of different faiths and beliefs to listen, learn, and build trust where there were once divides. Over five years, more than fifty partners worked side by side to strengthen Freedom of Religion and Belief and to turn dialogue into lasting cooperation.

Supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its embassies, JISRA became a shared journey of courage, humility, and persistence. A reminder that peace is not built in a single moment, but in the everyday acts of meeting, listening, and understanding one another.

Though the programme has come to an end, the bridges it built remain. They live on in the communities that continue to nurture them, in the leaders and youth who carry the work forward, and in the relationships that prove that peace, once built, can endure.

The bridge remains — strong enough for others to cross, and wide enough to welcome everyone.

www.jisra.org

