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## EAST AFRICA POLICY BRIEF NO.3

Youth Engagement in FoRB Initiatives

# Reimagining the Role of Religion in Building Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies: East Africa and Beyond

*Recommendations informed by a workshop for Scholars, Policymakers,  
Practitioners, and the Communities in the Horn and East Africa*



Ministry of Foreign Affairs



# Youth Engagement in FoRB Initiatives

## INTRODUCTION

This thematic area examines the crucial role of youth actors in protecting and promoting the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and other interrelated rights to create just and peaceful societies. This brief highlights the key findings of the workshop regarding engagement with youth actors in the Horn and the East African region, their meaningful participation, their significant contributions to protecting the right to FoRB, and the challenges they encountered.

The Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) focuses on various initiatives related to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). It aims to build the capacity of young religious leaders by creating opportunities for them to engage with one another in communities that experience religious tension. JISRA facilitates intra-, inter-, and extra-religious dialogues among youth and leverages technology and social

media to enhance their advocacy for religious peacebuilding. Additionally, the initiative promotes intergenerational dialogues within local communities.

Workshop discussions highlight the importance of youth-led religious engagement efforts and meaningful youth inclusion in FoRB-led peace-building processes. Recommendations include youth-sensitive capacity building for FoRB and religious literacy efforts for youth actors, supporting grassroots youth groups for religious engagements, and promoting the right to FoRB in communities. Young people's participation in formal and institutional spaces can strengthen youth advocacy efforts in FoRB promotions. It is also significant to find youth-friendly spaces for religious engagements and FoRB initiatives by working with youth and acknowledging young people's ownership over those spaces.

## THE WORKSHOP

The workshop, 'Reimagining the Role of Religion in Building Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies' on 5-6 November 2024, aimed to locate religion's contribution to building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, creating space to re-envision what these concepts look like in practice. Religion has frequently been viewed as a problematic aspect of peace and security in domestic and international settings. Tainted by associations with conflict, terrorism, and violent extremism within a broadly secularist international public domain, religion is frequently ignored or deliberately excluded from projects aiming to build peace, democracy, and inclusive and just societies. Yet this narrative, while pervasive, is far from the full story. Religion, in all its multifaceted complexity, makes rich and diverse contributions to the goal of realizing just and inclusive societies. Excluding religious actors and factors from analysis and policy and program development limits the options we have available for pursuing peace and, worse, allows fringe and extremist groups to grow and strengthen if unchecked.

The workshop specifically focused on the Horn and the East African context, a region that has seen a marked spread of religion-linked conflicts and extremist activities over the last two decades. Representatives from government, non-government, international organisations, academics, and civil society networks participated in the workshop.



## THE CONTEXT

Youth engagement is key in promoting the right to FoRB in the Horn and East African Region due to their vitality and the demographic spaces wielded at the local and national levels,<sup>1</sup> as predicted in the Brookings Report 2019.<sup>2</sup> Young religious actors are pivotal in FoRB initiatives and need to be nurtured.<sup>3</sup> In many countries of the region, youth exclusion was strongly evident, combined with other forms of marginalization associated with religion, ethnicity, gender, location, and culture.<sup>4</sup>

Young people under the age of 35 are rarely found in formal leadership positions in religious institutions.<sup>5</sup> Meaningful youth participation and their roles as

leaders are hindered due to existing cultural stereotypes and structural impediments of clans, tribes, and other ethnic leadership pathways of ‘elders as leaders’ handed over through generations.<sup>6</sup> The situation is even more difficult for young women in decision-making and leadership positions to navigate gender stereotypes and other intersectionalities.<sup>7</sup>

Many young people are skeptical of the ability of existing institutions and leadership to solve their issues and concerns. Most often, young people have taken steps to address their concerns through protests and demonstrations, such as the prevailing Gen Z protests in Kenya.<sup>8</sup> The spread of the protest as shown Figure 2.<sup>9</sup>

Over the next three decades, sub-Saharan Africa's youth population will grow faster than any other region. By 2050, sub-Saharan Africa will make up 33 percent of the world youth population, up from 19 percent in 2015. During this period, sub-Saharan Africa's youth population will increase by 522 million while the rest of the world's youth population declines by 220 million.

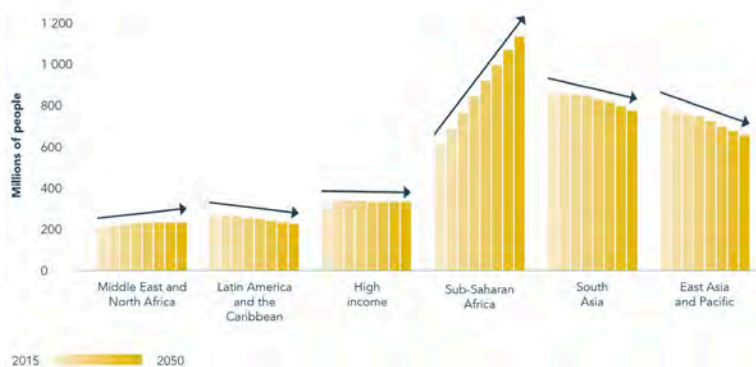


Figure 1: Africa's changing demographics – one-third of global youth will be in sub-Saharan Africa. Source: Brookings (2019)

<sup>1</sup> Nyole, A., Randall, D., & Saruni, N. (2024). *The Roots and Vaccine of the City: African Youth as Catalysts for Urban Vitality and Well-being*. *The Journal of Public Space*, 9(2), 167–184. <https://doi.org/10.32891/jps.v9i2.1723>

<sup>2</sup> Dews, F. (2019). *Africa's changing demographics*: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/charts-of-the-week-africas-changing-demographics/>

<sup>3</sup> *The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers* (2024). *Supporting Religious Actors for Peaceful Elections in Sub-Saharan Africa*: <https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/supporting-religious-actors-for-peaceful-elections-in-sub-saharan-africa/>; Foster, R. (2023). *Towards youth leadership on freedom of religion or belief FoRB*. *Search for Common Ground*. <https://tinyurl.com/yc6md48r>

<sup>4</sup> *African Security Sector Network*. (2022). *Youth violence, exclusion and injustice: Knowledge and lessons learnt from Africa for positioning inclusive, democratic governance*. *African Security Sector Network*. <https://tinyurl.com/44y9t9st>

<sup>5</sup> Cox A., Nozell M., Buba I. (2017). *Implementing UNSCR 2250: Youth and religious actors engaging for peace*: <https://tinyurl.com/bdd7pnhp>

<sup>6</sup> Kayizzi-Mugerwa, S. (2019). *Youth in Africa: Between marginalisation and demographic dividend*. *Southern African Journal of Policy and Development*, 4(2), Article 6. <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/sajpd/vol4/iss2/6/>; Ogo, I. (2015). *Enhancing youth-elder collaboration in Governance in Africa*. *Discussion paper*. *Mandela Institute for Development Studies*. <https://tinyurl.com/22736zyy>

<sup>7</sup> *United Nations Women*. (2024). *Policy brief: The status of women movement in Africa*. <https://tinyurl.com/4unpffru>

<sup>8</sup> Kibuacha, F. (2024). *GeoPoll report: Gen Z protests in Kenya*. *GeoPoll*. <https://www.geopoll.com/blog/geopoll-report-youth-protests-in-kenya>

<sup>9</sup> *ACLEDE* (2024). *Despite a crackdown on Gen Z demonstrations, dissent persists in Kenya*. <https://tinyurl.com/y3ufbrkb>

Fragility, violent conflicts, terrorism, and the COVID-19 pandemic in the East African region exacerbate existing challenges and hurdles for youth living in fragile and conflict-affected societies.<sup>10</sup> International partners advocating for FoRB initiatives need to explore new areas of youth engagement and ways to improve youth’s meaningful participation. In countries engaged in political tensions, such as the Gen Z protests in Kenya<sup>11</sup> or countries engaged in varied forms of political violence or conflicts, such as

Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia, there is recognition that young people can engage in peacebuilding via religious engagements, leading non-violent revolutions and protests, using new technologies to mobilize societies and build harmony by deconstructing harmful narratives to bring about change. Young people are vital stakeholders in religious engagements and FoRB-led peace-building initiatives and can be agents of change, contributing to a more just and peaceful society.<sup>12</sup>

## Gen Z movement demonstrations

1 January - 29 November 2024

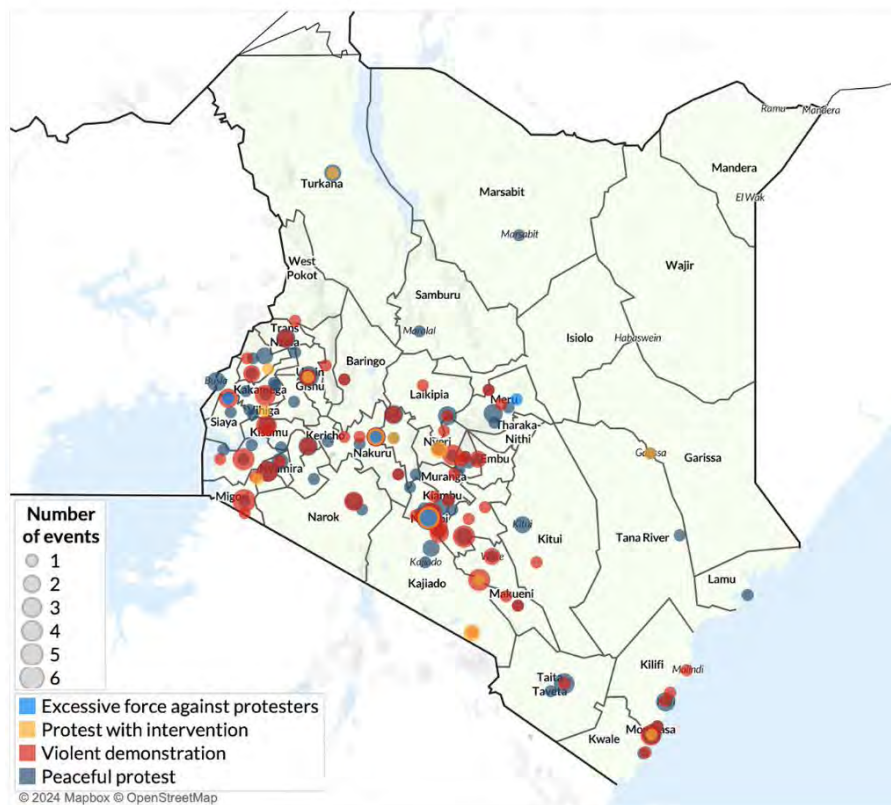


Figure 2: Gen Z movement. Source: ACLED (2024)

<sup>10</sup> Yayboke, E., Méndez Leal, E., Metzger, C., & Staguhn, J. (2021). *Drivers of recovery: Elevating the youth, peace, and security agenda*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/drivers-recovery-elevating-youth-peace-and-security-agenda>; Megersa, K. (2020). *COVID-19 in Eastern Africa: Impact analysis on conflict and security*. Institute of Development Studies. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/26431204>

<sup>11</sup> In Kenya, the Gen-Z or Generation Z protests were predominantly led and headed by youth (those born in the late 90s and early 2000s) who demanded the rejection of the finance bill. Later, these protests evolved to demand accountability and an end to impunity, incompetence, cronyism, and wastage of public resources in the executive and legislative arms of government. Moreover, Gen-Z redefined the organisation and conduct of protests wherein social media became the medium to coordinate and validate their concerns, garner support from allies – including millennials and civil society, and communicate and orchestrate peaceful nationwide protests.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, M. R., & Jiménez, L. A. (2022). *Youth agency in peacebuilding: Reframing the relationship between youth, leadership, and religion*. *The Ecumenical Review*, 74(5), 760–779. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12745>

**The following key findings, issues, and recommendations were discussed at the workshop:**

1. Youth engagement in FoRB initiatives entails youth religious actors in religious engagements at intra-, inter-, and extra-religious pathways, bringing on board their varied understandings, experiences, and interpretations based on their intersectionality and contextuality.
2. FoRB initiatives to keep pace with evolving socio-political, economic, and technological trends if youth engagement is to be successful in Kenya and the East African region.
3. Youth engagement necessitates finding spaces that young people have claimed and designing and implementing FoRB initiatives in these spaces, rather than trying to invite youth to spaces that do not give them a sense of ownership or inclusion. Youth engagements require effective partnerships, networks, and structures to enable meaningful participation of youth.
4. Youth spaces are mainly facilitated by the Internet or social media, led and designed by youth religious actors to advance FoRB initiatives.
5. Openness to youth involvement in FoRB initiatives requires recognizing youth as actors and leaders in religious engagements and peacebuilding processes, who can provide solutions, not through the lens of perpetrators or victims, depriving them of positive agency.
6. Intergenerational attitudes and conflicts have often hardened attitudes toward youth religious actors and their involvement in FoRB initiatives.





## ISSUES OF CONCERN EMANATING FROM THE WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS

***Youth engagement in promoting the right to FoRB requires acknowledging the significant roles played by young people, some in their capacities as religious actors at the international, national, and local levels***

However, youth religious actors remain less visible in policy-level discussions, and their roles and positions as religious and peacebuilding actors are yet to be recognized. Most workshop participants alluded to youth as

experts in their own contexts and recognized the roles young people can actively contribute with their valuable insight to influence FoRB initiatives in their own community or context.

Youth initiatives working to address religious and belief discrimination can benefit from an intersectional approach in promoting the right to FoRB. Youth participation in religious engagements is diverse, reflecting the youth's intersectionalities, which are contextual. FoRB initiatives should be attuned to experiences and factors that shape positive youth engagement and inclusivity. These intersectional identities give meaning to their experiences and motivations in religious engagements. In Africa, youth definitions vary based on socio-cultural and economic factors. The African Union Youth Charter defines youth as individuals between the ages of 15 and 35 years. However, as a continent, youth age and experiences vary, and this needs to be carefully factored in designing youth-led FoRB initiatives and youth-centered policy making:

*We need to understand that the youth are diverse. But even as we talk of Gen Zs [youth political protests in Kenya] we need to know that they are not the same because we talk of 18-35 years of age. They are all in the youth category, yet have different demographics, so even as we engage them, we need to take care of these differences (Workshop Participant, November 2024).*

Just as youth contribution is recognized in FoRB initiatives, project implementers must reflect on youth engagement in FoRB. Critical discussions should center on what youth engagement entails for youth, their roles, and expectations, and engaging modalities in these FoRB initiatives, and youth must be part of these conversations. A workshop participant explained that when youth engagement in FoRB initiatives is discussed, we need to reflect on the following questions:

*What does youth engagement in FoRB mean for young people? What does it mean for us? It means that youth, religious youth actors are valuable contributors to FoRB and peacebuilding. Wherever we have religious engagement conversations, it's important to have young people represented in these tables. It also means that we need to actively and creatively bring young people in and work with them as an important resource. So not just programming for them and talking about them, but bringing them into the space of discussion. What does this mean? We also understood that youth are digital natives, and that is where they operate. And they have large offline and online networks. So, how do we take advantage of their nativity, their digital nativity? How do we ensure that we can work with them in their spaces? (Workshop Participant, November 2024).*



Similarly, another workshop participant alluded to the missing faces of youth in religious engagement efforts and the need to keep up with the evolving trends:

*The face of the youth is missing, and thinking about the Gen Z uprising - It was not only in Kenya, but it happened across the region. We are having a problem with this age group. They are moving out of our religious setups. I think we need to sit and ask, where are they, and then go for them. And when we talk about polarization or difficult issues, the youth are not with us. They are moving further away. An example is the membership in our churches.*

*It dropped drastically after the COVID-19 pandemic. We have tried to look for the young people who left the churches. Actually, about a third have not come back. The question is, where are they? And when they appear again, will they come as we had known them before – especially after the Gen Z phenomenon? (Workshop Participant, November 2024).*



**Youth engagement in promoting the right to FoRB requires acknowledging the significant roles played by young people, some in their capacities as religious actors at the international, national, and local levels**

For example, recent efforts in Kenya desired a revived strategy to incorporate the Gen-Z trends in religious engagement efforts. The workshop participants were eager to comprehend the evolving context of Gen Z movements in Kenya, where the complex scenario of youth protests became an eye-opener to understanding how young people should be involved in religious engagement activities.

The Kenyan example reflects the emerging trend of youth uprisings across the continent, and governments, both in Africa and around the world, may find themselves facing similar unrest if they disregard fundamental issues of their youth's unmet potential. In such evolving contexts, some workshop participants reviewed

how youth were engaged and needed to be engaged in FoRB initiatives and peacebuilding activities. A workshop participant highlighted this as follows:

*We find ourselves a little mixed up in the Gen Z phenomenon, because, as I said, it's faceless, religion-less, party-less, and so on. We do not understand the phenomenon, but it's a question that is going on in the region, and it is an important aspect of our conversation. We therefore are saying that as a way forward for FoRB initiatives, it is important to be with this conversation. We need to strengthen dialogue platforms and expand FoRB literacy programmes, enhance youth engagement, and develop women's leadership on our way forward (Workshop Participant, November 2024).*



This was reiterated by a workshop participant who explained the need to engage youth more often due to the deepening rift of youth in religious engagement efforts:

*I think today's religion and tomorrow's religion depend on the youth. And the more we bring them closer to our activities, the better. However, the realization that youth are no longer interested in religion pushes them away from religious communities and youth religious engagements. Most often, youth just bear the names of their religions, but they seem to be drifting further from religion and engagement with the current religious systems. So, how do we follow them? Or how do we shake the existing systems? How do we remain truthful to what we believe as religions and their engagements? (Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).*

Reduced youth involvement in existing religious engagement spaces was attributed to the disgruntlement faced by young people who felt the need to critique existing leadership. Youth dissent towards existing leadership evolved as a result of Gen Z protests criticizing religious leaders for their closeness to politicians as enabling politicians to be more corrupt. Participants highlighted a need for more in-depth study and interactions with Gen Zs regarding their views of government and religious leaders.

Further, the focus on FoRB youth engagements in the political arena should be a priority, which is timely, particularly in light of recent Gen Z events in Kenya as well as other regions. The workshop touched upon the importance of youth participation and engagement, but did not offer concrete interventions on the needed strategies. Nevertheless, discussions centered on the need for partnership efforts in FoRB-youth engagement work.



### **Religious engagements with youth require partnerships, networks, and structures (local and international)**

In working with youth communities, workshop participants agreed on the need for supporting organizations or institutional partners. JISRA implementing partners explained that partnerships and networks can emerge at several levels. For example, the initial contact that leads to a partnership might come from young people themselves talking about their needs and interests and feeding these back to the FoRB initiative.

It might also come from conversations between youth and civil society organisations, where shared interests are identified and an exchange of ideas and information can enrich FoRB activities. A workshop participant shared experiences on how youth engagement through capacity building, connections, and collaborative actions has proven to be effective in youth engagement in FoRB initiatives:

*Strengthen youth capacities for collaborative action for inclusive religious norms, while simultaneously building the capacity of elders and powerholders to work with youth. Strengthening their capacities will help them promote FoRB, tolerance, religious diversity, and peaceful coexistence. Our programme maps existing formal and informal youth structures and engages them to address FoRB issues, and enables them to connect in all project locations. Already, some JISRA Kenya partners have been working with these youth networks in previous FoRB work, and they will activate them for JISRA interventions. Our programmes also create opportunities for youth to take collaborative action in all phases of the project life cycle, both on their own and in partnership with others (Workshop Participant, November 2024).*

Youth decision-making at the policy level is imperative for the meaning-making of local and international partnerships in religious engagements and FoRB promotion. Further, youth-led religious engagements should be supported with existing international and

local frameworks and resolutions aimed at promoting youth involvement in development and building peace. For example, the global policy framework UNSCR 2250 explores how conflict impacts young people's lives and how these impacts can be mitigated.

It highlights the importance of how youth can be meaningfully included in creating peaceful communities, the importance of partnerships, and the creation of protective spaces for youth engagement:

*When we look at the UNSCR 2250 in engaging young people, young people through FORB, we remember that partnerships are important. So, are we actively creating opportunities for partnerships with young people? Are we providing resources? Are we providing grants? Are we providing spaces? Are we providing leadership opportunities for young people in the design of the activities that we're doing? It also means that we put in protection measures. What types of protection measures do we have under the UNSCR 2250, both as the State and Organisations? So, for example, in the Gen Z conversation that we've been having, the UN requires that the State protect young people. So, what's the role of the State actors in providing protection measures? What's the role of the community in protecting young people? What's the role of the religious actors in ensuring young people in their spaces are safe, that they can express themselves, that they can engage, and that they can have conversations where they feel they are safe? This is why we use the lens of UNSCR 2250, as it covers young women and young men. (Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).*

**Youth engagement necessitates finding spaces that young people have claimed. FoRB initiatives should be designed and implemented in these spaces rather than trying to invite youth to spaces that do not give them a sense of ownership or inclusion.**

Youth engagement necessitates finding spaces that have been claimed by young people. FoRB initiatives should be designed and implemented in these spaces rather than trying to invite youth to spaces that do not give them a sense of ownership or inclusion. Youth-led spaces give them a sense of meaning and place-making, as these spaces fulfil their needs and aspirations. FoRB projects require facilitating these youth spaces, where initiatives in these spaces are led, designed, and implemented by youth. Based on project experiences, a participant described how spaces for youth engagement need to be looked at during the design of initiatives.

The participant categorized these spaces as claimed and closed spaces:

*We have three types of spaces that are important for our work. As we look for youth, you will find them in claimed spaces. So, we're looking for Gen Zs. You'll find them in their claimed spaces. Claimed space is where youth have created the space for themselves. It is where the law says 15% of young people need to be given positions. It is where the Constitution clearly articulates the role of young people, but also the spaces that young people have created. The youth peace and security forums are important spaces. We have the Gen Z movement. It's a space that young people have created and claimed. So that is where you find them. So, when we are programming, it is for us to find those spaces where young people have claimed and work in those spaces rather than trying to invite them to our spaces. Work with the spaces where you can find them. Sometimes it's closed spaces, and closed spaces are also important to work with. If you find that you're in a closed space... ensure that that space has young people represented (Workshop Participant, November 2024).*



Participation of young people in formal and institutional spaces can strengthen religious engagements. However, their meaningful participation in these religious and political spaces is relatively low compared to older participants in the Horn and East African regions. This challenges the representativeness of young people in religious engagement efforts, which inevitably affects youth actors in promoting and protecting the right to FoRB. Young people under the age of 35 are rarely found in formal leadership positions in religious institutions. Meaningful youth participation and their roles as leaders are hindered due to existing cultural stereotypes of the inability to take individual and community responsibilities, and are hindered by structural impediments of clan, tribe, and ethnic leadership patterns

handed over through generations. Nevertheless, participants during the workshop highlighted the efforts put forth in bringing youth into their projects for meaningful engagements. This implies that efforts must also be taken to engage with and encourage older religious leaders to create meaningful leadership positions within their institutions, organisations, and places of worship.

During the workshop, a participant described efforts at the African Union to strengthen youth engagement in international inter-religious peacebuilding platforms. She explained using the experiences of the youth network “Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism” (iDove). iDove is an initiative launched in 2017 by the African Union and GIZ-BMZ. Since its inception, the initiative has embarked on a series of activities engaging young peacebuilders (aged 18-35) representing different faiths and regional as well as professional backgrounds, including community workers, researchers, academics, policymakers, and artists. To date, the initiative consists of a vibrant global network of young peacebuilders from the region, identifying themselves as ‘iDovers’. iDove is based on the premise that preventing violent extremism (PVE) requires a comprehensive ‘soft-power’ approach that focuses on the root causes of violent extremism. Bottom-up, innovative youth-led approaches have assisted in fostering mutual understanding, support, and cooperation between different generations and ethnic, social, and religious groups.

So, we have iDove, which has networks in Africa, Asia, and Europe. Here we deal with youth and their trends. We work mainly on social media platforms because social media is where youth are active. So that’s where we encourage youth, because we can’t find them in this inter-religious council of the AU. They are involved in these digital spaces, we train them so that they can be in this interreligious space, where they, together with elders, can speak for effective interventions in the region.

– Hazel Dixon, African Union Representative

Identifying spaces for young people is necessary for skill and capacity transfers to strengthen religious engagements. Contemporarily, digital spaces have proved to be effective in youth engagements for constructive dialogue processes, deconstructing harmful narratives, and providing platforms for alternative narratives. Further, these spaces should reflect on contextual theology to advance FoRB initiatives:

*These groups, compliant with technology in the age of the Internet of Things, are complicated. We try to address Gen-Z issues in the Gen-X spaces. Youth do not want to engage in these spaces. They don’t want to come to church, and so on. So, this is a phenomenon that we’ll have to look at very critically because our communities of faith are forums that can address many of these issues. The FoRB platforms need to bring in contextual theology discussions where intra- and inter-religious discussions are held comfortably. (Workshop Participant, November 2024).*

***Building trust and protecting youth religious actors in both open and closed FoRB spaces is key to youth engagement efforts***

Being aware of youth spaces entails both open and closed spaces. Most often, FoRB initiatives rarely penetrate closed spaces. Open spaces for youth include formal settings, easily accessible in communities, like schools, universities, and youth institutions and networks. Closed spaces include the informal channels of youth and youth networks, such as unemployed youth, marginalised or stigmatised youth, such as youth undergoing rehabilitation, youth under substance abuse, youth who are also categorised as sexual minorities, youth in informal settlements, youth in gangs, and crimes or violence. Closed spaces are where we find excluded youth who are vulnerable to ending up in violence and conflicts, and need interventions. FoRB initiatives need to support activities in these closed and informal spaces. A workshop participant explained this as follows:

*How are we working with youth who conflict with the law, or those who have passed through the criminal justice system? How do we ensure that we include them? How do we ensure that their conversations are also heard on those tables that might not be open for them because they've been in one way or the other, conflicted with the law? (Workshop Participant, November 2024).*

Religious actors need to strengthen youth-friendly spaces, creating an enabling environment for youth to voice out their concerns, address hard questions, and build trust in these spaces. A workshop participant explained how we should understand the Gen-Z group of youth by understanding their aspirations and finding spaces that would give them a sense of belonging.

*I want to say, that's the Gen-Z question, something we can't run away from.*

*I think it's a big opportunity. From the work that we have done with the youth, the key lesson that we have learned is that youth want to feel a sense of belonging. So, religious actors need to find spaces to ensure that the youth feel that they belong to the congregations, they don't just receive, but they're part of it. It would be nice to see very young bishops and sheikhs there, but, more importantly, they want what we call meaning-making of these experiences.*

*Youth are interested in seeing our religious institutions become more accountable, inclusive, impactful, and authentic. They want to see relations being established and provision of growth, but more importantly, they want to find meaning in religion. Finally, they want to see our religious leaders, especially the ones who have access to the State, to Parliament, to policymakers, to speak for young people.*

*In Kenya, we lost over 100 youths recently due to the disappearances and clashes between the government and Gen Z. The youth are asking us questions as to when we are going to speak about these deaths. And when are we going to make youth feel protected and their issues and rights promoted, as part of their expressions in religion and beliefs? (Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).*

The trust-built relationship between the government and the youth communities is important in creating enabling spaces for youth engagement in PCVE and peacebuilding initiatives. Most often, experiences from the Horn and East African region reveal that young people as a cluster group are affected by recruitment, radicalization to violent extremist groups, and also by counterterrorism responses by the State and other actors. According to a workshop participant, in all these contexts, young people look up to religious actors for support when their rights have been abused, mainly by the state. These are the times when young people feel alienated, isolated, and vulnerable.

*Because youth see their rights violated. Youth have been harassed by the State many times in the region, and they expect that our religious leaders will step up to help them. So, in our work with the youth, we consider the protection question to be very important. Here, we are talking about the protection of minority youth. (Workshop Participant, November 2024).*



***Openness to youth involvement in FoRB initiatives requires recognizing youth as actors of peacebuilding processes who can provide solutions, and not through the lens of perpetrators or victims***

Youth need to be viewed as political agents rather than through negative attitudes or stereotypes of youth as victims or perpetrators in youth engagements. The lens of youth as victims or as perpetrators of violence, protests, violent extremists, or criminals misrepresents the youth agency in community decision-making processes. This negative narrative lens is harmful. Youth-insensitive projects can perpetuate the stigmatization of young people and affect meaningful religious engagements in their respective communities. This prevailing perception is further deteriorated when religious engagement efforts reinforce traditional elders as religious actors rather than youth in leadership positions:

*In this way, the Giriama elders aligned themselves with broader trends in the Kenyan society, where political and religious leaders tend to associate a wide range of problems with youth, considering youth as problematic. Such problems include political violence, violent extremism, drug use, and sexual behaviour that is deemed immoral. Such reasoning strengthens the position of Giriama elders alongside other religious leaders who are often older and male, who participate in interfaith dialogues that are funded by Western donors (Workshop Participant, November 2024).*

Religious engagements that lack youth inclusion can have negative impacts on the relationship between elders and youth. The youth often disapprove of the moral evaluations of older religious leaders, and may criticize them for the selfish use of donor funds or the lack of support in countering the economic and political challenges they face in their daily lives. Hence, FoRB initiatives require strengthening intergenerational relationships through youth inclusion efforts to support local peacebuilding efforts.



***The generational gap between elderly religious leaders and young people contributes to the feeling of being disempowered in FoRB platforms***

The relationship between the elderly and young people needs to be strengthened to enable youth to be engaged in community work. Elderly religious actors often make assumptions about what young people need or want in terms of guidance and mentoring to influence the lives of young people. This does not always fit with the goals of young people themselves. The emergence of open conflict between generations is the disharmony between the attitudes of the younger generation and the elders in some FoRB platforms. Hence, negative attitudes and perceptions culminate in hindering



dialogue processes and youth engagements in protecting the right to FoRB. Power imbalances in these relationships need to be addressed for intergenerational discussions:

*We also talk about intergenerational projects or activities as being difficult to handle because of the existing power dynamics. If we've got young people doing an activity together with the elders, how do we ensure that there's a fair distribution of power within that conversation, and to a point, can the baton be handed over to the young people to lead the process? This goes back to our religious institutions as well. How do we enable young people to come up to leadership positions, and have an equal contribution to the religious conversations happening? (Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).*

Mismatch of values and interests between youth and other groups impedes religious engagement efforts. This is mainly because generational differences in knowledge, practices, and aspirations have not been acknowledged, and prevailing trends focus on shared morals and ethics. A participant explained value contradictions addressed based on morals and ethics to strengthen inter-religious peacebuilding:

*In my view, I think youth are against religious leaders who have reduced religion to a ritualistic and cultic practice devoid of its moral and ethical values. If this trend continues, I think we are losing our youth very fast, both in the mosques and the churches. And I think what the religious leaders need is to jointly do a moral rearmament of their faiths, starting with the religious leaders in the communities they serve. The big question before we*

*talk about freedom of religion and belief is how multi-religious societies ensure harmony, while at the same time conserving and handing over distinct traditions and values to their respective religion or traditions from one generation to another. In other words, as a Christian and a Catholic, I understand how I learn my faith on a day-to-day basis. My parents are faithful people trying to hand over this faith to the children in the way they understood it. Not in the way it is defined in the books. Moral codes lie at the core of every religion and tradition, though often transgressed, these codes aim at securing justice, fairness, and freedom from violence. Shared common moral commitments could be identified in every religion, and they will offer a foundation for cooperation, serving as common ground for religious traditions, and to work together for peaceful coexistence and mutual concern. (Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).*

A lack of tech literacy among elders, especially social media, is furthering the digital gap between youth and older generations, hindering collaborative religious engagements between elderly religious actors and youth. Other factors include the inability to compromise between the two generations, impeding collaborations with youth in religious activities:

*The bigger lesson we have to learn as religious leaders is that these young people know things we need to listen to [technologically facilitated knowledge and skills]. We think we know more than them. Sometimes, they think they know better. We don't know theirs. These intergenerational dialogues need to start based on the premise of learning to listen to one another. I've been in a situation where the youth have been given positions*

*in the church, and after 2 months, they disappear. This is because the system is hostile and structured, and does not pave the way for their vision. It's about giving them the position and also learning to adjust based on their needs (Workshop Participant, November 2024).*

Combined with other factors like culture or indigenous beliefs, intergenerational conflicts can lead to violence or death, as in the case of the killings of Kaya or Giriama elders on the Kenyan Coast. Intergenerational conflicts are often connected to the ability of youth to make their own decisions concerning their lives, and access to family land or land ownership. A workshop participant described these conflicts as having led to the accusations of witchcraft and the killings of elders by younger people, in many cases, family members:

*Many of these elders belong to the Giriama ethnic group, who co-exist with Muslims and Christians in coastal Kenya. Previous research suggests that witchcraft accusations are often related to intergenerational conflicts over family resources. Yet, witchcraft accusations may also be incited by Christian preachers who see indigenous traditions as 'devilish', or criminalized by government officials who denounce witchcraft beliefs as backward (Workshop Participant, November 2024).*

Religious engagements that facilitate inter- and intra-faith relationships require the inclusion of religious actors beyond the mainstream religion and beliefs in the community. This includes the voices of young men and women from indigenous religions and beliefs, whose voices remain marginalised in their own communities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enable and stimulate FoRB initiatives and platforms for youth to engage actively, decisively, openly, and innovatively to express their needs and concerns. Here, initiatives should pave the way to seek and understand what their needs are and how they prioritize them, and facilitate youth ownership over projects, programs, and policies. Offer opportunities for youth to develop their own FoRB initiatives, supported by religious leaders and partner organisations.
2. Address intersectionalities to build youth-inclusive FoRB initiatives and policies. Youth demographics vary, and their varied understandings, experiences, and interpretations add value to youth initiatives. Make deliberate efforts to incorporate disadvantaged and marginalized populations, such as young women and girls, religious and belief minorities, those in conflict with the law, those affected by violence, and those with disabilities, using effective networks and channels to reach them.
3. Strengthen youth-friendly, youth-led FoRB spaces to create an enabling environment for youth to voice their concerns and address difficult questions in these spaces. Closed or open spaces where there is trust enable youth to articulate their needs and concerns effectively. These platforms should be spaces for dissent and debate, establishing avenues for alternative views.
4. Support effective partnerships, networks, and structures to enable meaningful participation of youth in religious engagements to protect the right to FoRB. For example, support the localisation of UN resolution 2250, on youth, peace, and security, especially through FoRB initiatives to deal with matters of youth, engagement and intergenerational conversations in the Horn and East African regions. Localization of UN resolution 2250 strengthens the efforts of local youth religious actors to engage in FoRB initiatives, enabling conversations to trickle down to the grassroots level as opposed to national or city-level discussions.
5. Facilitate technology-led FoRB and religious engagement platforms through youth religious actors to reach out to young people. Today, young people mostly connect and even congregate on online platforms. These are the spaces where most young people are found. Some of these spaces remain polarised and hostile, with the promotion of hatred and anger among and within communities. These spaces remain missed opportunities for participation and religious engagements. Youth religious actors remain pivotal in these online youth spaces, enabling youth-led FoRB engagements.
6. Institutionalise the inclusivity of the youth religious actors for religious engagements as an overall involvement in FoRB initiatives rather than mere tokenistic efforts. Most often, youth are not represented in forums, and the discussions centre on youth. Therefore, FoRB initiatives should emphasize youth inclusivity in practice. Inclusivity of youth religious actors requires expanding the range of actors to make the process more comprehensive beyond traditional religious leadership.
7. Capacitate youth religious actors in skills on FoRB and Religious literacy, social cohesion, and nonviolence, preparing them for leadership roles, and offering them an opportunity to influence others in their religious communities.
8. Encourage religious leaders to create opportunities for youth leadership in their communities.
9. Apply a youth and intergenerational lens in FoRB initiatives, where initiatives should facilitate intergenerational relationships and partnerships to reduce intergenerational attitudes and conflicts.

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