



# CLAIMING SPACE FOR FAITH

Including freedom of religion or belief in the fight for civic space



# Contents

<u>3</u>	Include FoRB in the fight for civic space	<u>28</u>	Strategies used to fight shrinking space and FoRB violations
<u>4</u>	Recommendations		
<u>5</u>	In brief	<u>30</u>	Appendix 1. The Survey
<u>6-7</u>	Two interlinked trends of restricted freedom	<u>31</u>	Bibliography
<u>8-9</u>	Methodology	<u>32</u>	Endnotes
<u>10</u>	FBOs as civil society actors		
<u>10</u>	Level of civic space and FoRB violations at country level		
<u>12</u>	Trends and experiences of shrinking civic space and FoRB violations		
<u>12</u>	Civic space restrictions affecting CSOs		
	Experiences from Tanzania		
	Experiences from Burkina Faso		
<u>17</u>	Violations of FoRB		
	Experiences from Bangladesh		
<u>23</u>	Specific challenges for FBOs as compared to secular CSOs?		
	Experiences from Nepal		
	Experiences from Moldova		

**Cover photo:** Girls from Mindanao in the Philippines. These girls belong to the Lumad people and are fighting for their rights to land and education. In 2011, an Italian priest was shot in front of his church in Mindanao because of his fight for the indigenous people's rights.

Photo: Unfiltered Communications

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**Disclaimer:** This report focuses on the experiences and discrimination against Christians of different denominations. This is not intended to minimise or make invisible the experiences of other religion and belief minority groups, or to introduce a hierarchy of experience and discrimination. We fully support the rights of all individuals, regardless of their religion or belief.

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## Include FoRB in the fight for civic space

**THE GLOBAL TREND** of shrinking space for civil society persists, and is aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, there is an internationally widespread negative development regarding the respect for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB); a trend that is seldom acknowledged by actors within the general development and diplomatic community. In line with the observations in this report, we argue that these two trends are closely linked and that the solution to both problems needs to be found in coordination, as ***FoRB is an integral aspect of civic space.***

In this report, faith based organisations (FBOs) and secular civil society organisations (CSOs) from 29 countries share their experiences of violations of both civic space and FoRB. These organisations represent a highly diverse group, which is also reflected in the challenges they face and their coping strategies. Their different testimonies highlight how FoRB as a fundamental human right is an intrinsic component of civic space and why neglect of this close relationship cannot continue.

The report also highlights the need for a redefinition of our understanding of the link between FoRB and gender equality. FoRB protects people - men and women - as equal right holders. This equal protection is however far from reality. As is exemplified in this report, ***FoRB violations affect women differently than men.*** Synergies between FoRB and women's rights need to be recognised and acted upon by decision makers, development actors and researchers.<sup>1</sup>

It is time to take action. It is time to change negative trends and increase the space for individuals and communities to work for democracy and a human rights-based sustainable development.

As we take on the global challenge to meet the ***Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030***, we have to join the dots and include the

protection of FoRB in our fight for civic space. To do so has specific relevance for gender equality (SDG 5), peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16) and partnership (SDG 17). We also need to improve our understanding of the specific civic space challenges that FBOs encounter.

SMC believes that the recommendations in this report are a helpful guide to policy makers, researchers and civil society actors in our common mission towards a more just, peaceful and inclusive global society for all.



*Charlotta Norrby*

Charlotta Norrby, Secretary General,  
SMC – Faith in Development



# Recommendations

## DEVELOPMENT POLICY MAKERS AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCIES:

1. **Recognise the specific civic space challenges** that FBOs often encounter, including non-recognition of religious identity, persecution and harassment of representatives of religious minorities and FBOs.
2. **Pay attention to the specific potential** that FBOs have to encounter declining civic space.
3. **Understand and accommodate the broad range of strategies** applied by both FBOs and secular CSOs in order to cope with shrinking space challenges and FoRB violations.
4. **Include FoRB together with other fundamental civic freedoms in the scope of civic space analysis and programming.**
5. **Recognise the interlinkages** between gender equality and FoRB in analysis and programming.
6. **Support inclusive FoRB initiatives** as an integrated part of democracy and human rights support.
7. **Include and recognise the diversity and experiences** of FBOs in dialogues and forums.
8. **Counteract illegitimate blanket legislation** on blasphemy, proselytism, conversion and speaking about faith/religion.

## RESEARCHERS AND INTERNATIONAL THINK TANKS:

1. Recognise and include the rich diversity of FBOs in research design, implementation and analysis.
2. Prioritise an inclusion of FoRB in definitions, research and monitoring of civic space.
3. Apply a FoRB and gender sensitive approach to analyses of civic space challenges and solutions.
4. Include gender and civic space dimensions in analyses of FoRB violations.



## In brief – recognising the specific civic space challenges that FBOs encounter

**FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS**, SMC has followed the impact of negative trends within both civic space and FoRB in the everyday operations of our member organisations' local partners. However, we lack more structured research on whether and how these two issues correlate and what coping strategies organisations apply. As a response to this need, this report presents the results of a survey that SMC conducted in 2019. The objective was to find out how civil society organisations experience shrinking civic space and FoRB violations. The survey also explores possible correlations between shrinking civic space and FoRB violations, as well as different strategies that organisations use to manage these challenges.

### 51 RESPONSES FROM 29 COUNTRIES

The report consists of 51 responses from 29 countries. Furthermore, it presents unique and in-depth accounts from FBOs within SMC's network in five countries. Depending on their context, the responding organisations experience pressure and restrictions by *state actors* as well as *non-state actors*, including terrorist groups. More than two fifths of the respondents say that state actors have tried to hinder or slow down their work. One fifth has similar experiences from non-state actors, of which a majority testify about serious violations such as violence, kidnapping and harassments.

### RESILIENCE TOWARDS RESTRICTIONS

In situations of shrinking civic space and increasing FoRB violations, organisations seem to develop a kind of “resilience” towards restrictions.

Many of the responding organisations have worked in their respective context for a long time, which often means they are well known and respected. Some of them experience that

FBOs have an advantageous position, making them less vulnerable to shrinking civic space as compared to secular CSOs.

### CLOSE LINKAGE BETWEEN FoRB AND GENDER EQUALITY

The report highlights the close linkage between FoRB and gender equality, which in turn underlines the need for a FoRB and gender sensitive approach in all initiatives to enable civic space. The results indicate that context analyses of FoRB produced by external experts often lack sufficient attention to gender dimensions.

*...organisations experience pressure and restrictions by state actors as well as non-state actors, including terrorist groups.*

Since the sample is small, it is not possible to draw any statistically reliable conclusions from the survey. There is thus need for further studies with larger samples. However, the organisations participating in the survey contribute with important insights regarding shrinking civic space and FoRB violations, which provide the basis for valuable policy recommendations.

## Two interlinked trends of restricted freedom

**THE GLOBAL TREND** of shrinking space for civil society has been observed for many years. The civil society alliance CIVICUS calls it a “continuing civic space crisis”.<sup>2</sup> According to Freedom House, 2019 saw a decline in global freedom for the 14<sup>th</sup> year in a row.<sup>3</sup> Statistics and testimonies from around the world provide a worrying picture of reduced space for action by citizens and civil society actors. This involves limited opportunities to organise, assemble peacefully and express views without risks for repercussions. According to CIVICUS, only 3% of the world’s population live in countries that are categorised as open.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, but maybe not as well known, respect for FoRB has faced a similar negative trend. Between 2007 and 2017, government restrictions on religion (including laws and policies), as well as social hostilities involving religion (including violence and harassment) have increased around the world.<sup>5</sup> These hostilities are often linked to high levels of illegitimate limitations to the human right freedom

of religion or belief (FoRB) limitations<sup>6</sup> rather than to religion as such. More than 80% of the world’s population live in countries where FoRB is highly restricted either by the state or by other groups in society.<sup>7</sup>

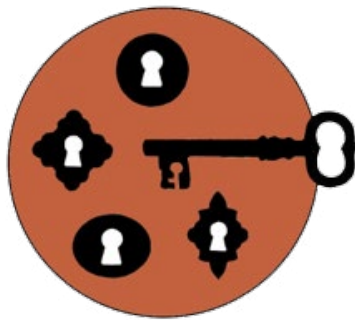
### FoRB IS PART OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIC SPACE

SMC has followed the development of these negative global trends with great concern. Moreover, SMC has also paid attention to the correlation between the two trends. FoRB is a fundamental human right and an essential part of civic space. Together with the rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly, information, opinion and expression, it is an important prerequisite for a democratic society. Yet FoRB is regularly left out of research and discussions on civic space - perhaps because the human right to FoRB is little known and often misunderstood. This report contributes to ensuring that FoRB is included in the civic space agenda.



Police surveillance of a Christian baptism in South East Asia. Photo: Unfiltered communications.

FoRB protects people, not religions, but includes both individual and collective protections for people. FoRB protects individuals' rights to believe and practice as they choose, as well as their right to practice together in community and to organise the life of that community.<sup>8</sup> According to international human rights law, the state is not allowed to limit the private or communal practice of religion or belief unless strict criteria for legitimacy are fulfilled.<sup>9</sup>



The realisation of freedom of religion or belief can open a lot of locked doors in contexts with shrinking civic space. Illustration © Majsan Sundell.

The close link between FoRB violations and shrinking space for civil society stems from this communal dimension of FoRB, together with these strict criteria for limitations. When religious or non-religious communities face FoRB violations, these violations, more often than not, also target freedom of assembly, association, movement and speech at both individual and group levels.

## THE PANDEMIC UNDERLINES HOW FoRB PROTECTS WOMEN'S RIGHTS

FoRB violations affecting women typically also affect their access to civic space e.g. restrictions on female leadership due to religiously

motivated legislation. When a gender dimension is added, the silence concerning FoRB in research and discussions on civic space becomes even more disturbing. FoRB includes each woman's right to choose not only her own religion or belief; but also how she wants to practice it and her right to influence the upbringing of her children at equal terms as their father.

The widespread lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 further highlighted the need for a FoRB and gender sensitive approach to all work related to civic space. Women in many contexts were shut off from public spaces where they normally have opportunities to meet, express themselves and practice FoRB.<sup>10</sup> It is critical that limitations of FoRB and other civil rights related to the pandemic are time-bound:

*Once the public health crisis is over, any limitations [of religious freedom] need to be removed, and people should once again be able to fully enjoy their right to practice their religion.*

Kirsten Lavery, International legal specialist, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, quoted in the report *The Corona pandemic hits the world's most vulnerable hard*.<sup>11</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

IN FEBRUARY 2019, SMC sent out a questionnaire to its member organisations, as well as partners within NORFORB (Nordic Ecumenical Network on Freedom of Religion or Belief), who in turn forwarded the questionnaire to their different local partner organisations. Considering the sensitive nature of the topic, the confidentiality of the respondents answers, was of outmost importance.<sup>12</sup>

The sample consists of 51 responses from 29 countries in Africa, Europe, Latin America and Asia. As a complement to the questionnaire, SMC conducted interviews with

representatives of local partner organisations during the period from February 2019 to May 2020.

An important methodological aspect of this report is the comparison of survey results with analyses and research conducted by external sources. For this purpose, SMC selected three well-known external sources: CIVICUS and its index on civic space, *Pew Research Center* and its index on FoRB (see tables below) and the *US Department of State* and its country analyses in the annual *International Religious Freedom Report*.<sup>13</sup>

### CIVICUS' INDEX ON CIVIC SPACE

The global alliance CIVICUS regularly monitors the situation for civil society around the world. Its civic space index is based on multiple sources, where information from

local civil society actors are given priority. In CIVICUS' index, countries are ranked according to the following five categories:

#### OPEN

The state both enables and safeguards the enjoyment of civic space for all people.

#### NARROWED

While the state allows individuals and civil society organisations to exercise their rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression, violations of these rights also take place.

#### OBSTRUCTED

Civic space is heavily contested by power holders, who impose a combination of legal and practical constraints on the full enjoyment of fundamental rights.

#### REPPRESSED

Civic space is significantly constrained. Active individuals and civil society members who criticise power holders risk surveillance, harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, injury and death.

#### CLOSED

There is complete closure, in law and in practice, of civic space.

CIVICUS: <https://monitor.civicus.org/Ratings/>



## SMC's CATEGORIES REGARDING FoRB VIOLATIONS BASED ON PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S INDEX

Pew Research Center is an independent fact tank that conducts social science research. Since 2007, Pew Research Center has published annual reports with data on religious restrictions around the world, including two indexes:

**Government Restrictions Index:** focusing on laws, policies and actions by state officials that restrict religious beliefs and practices.

**Social Hostilities Index:** focusing on violence and harassment by private individuals, organisations or groups that limit religious beliefs and practices. Pew Research Center ranks countries based on their scores on each of the two indexes.

For the purpose of this report, SMC has summarised Pew's two indexes and created the following categories regarding FoRB violations in a country:

### VERY LOW

Both government restrictions and social hostilities are ranked as low by Pew.

### MODERATE

Either government restrictions or social hostilities, or both, are ranked as moderate by Pew.

### HIGH

Either government restrictions or social hostilities, or both, are ranked as high by Pew.

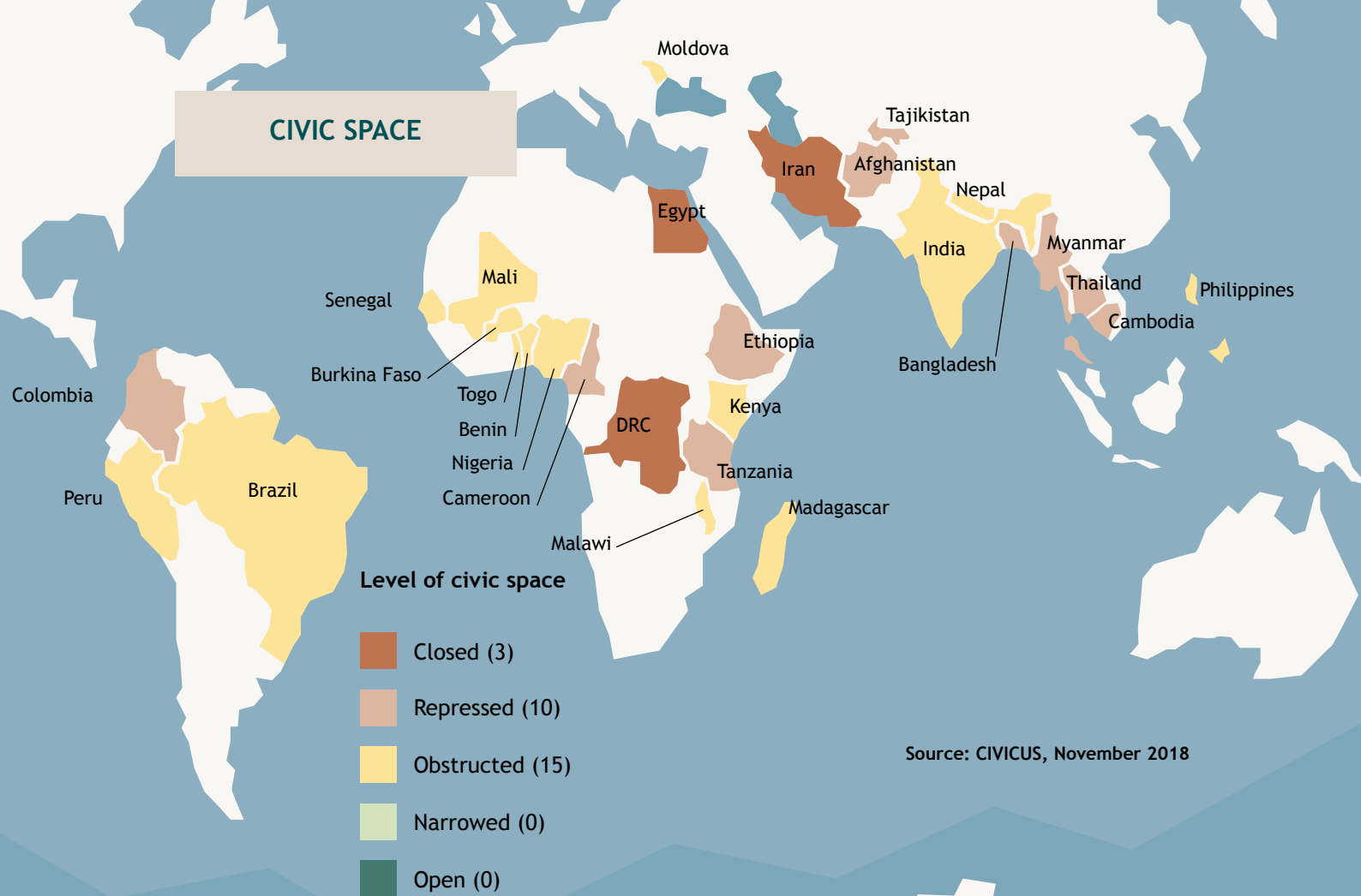
### VERY HIGH

Either government restrictions or social hostilities, or both, are ranked as very high by Pew.

In cases where Pew has given a country different scores on the two indexes, SMC has categorised the country according to the highest score.

Pew Research Center: <https://www.pewresearch.org/>

## CIVIC SPACE



## FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF



## FBOs AS CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

**“CIVIL SOCIETY” IS A BROAD TERM** that covers a variety of actors, from social movements and protesters on the streets to service providers and gap fillers. They all share a common space in society distinct from the government and market.<sup>14</sup> Civil society actors also include faith based organisations (FBOs), which involve a wide range of actors, from religious denominations and congregations to mission organisations and development and humanitarian organisations. FBOs share a faith based background and/or constituency, but are just like any other society actors, a diverse group.<sup>15</sup> In other words, civil society actors, including FBOs, are a heterogeneous group.

The experiences, and analyses, of civic space and violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) can vary greatly within the group of civil society actors. Factors such as societal

position, religious affiliation, type of work etc, all come into play. In order to understand specific groups’ and organisations’ experiences it is not enough to only look at general religious affiliations. Even within countries with a distinct religious majority; other minorities with the same religious affiliation can be subjected to severe restrictions both in relation to civic space and FoRB. General examples are non-orthodox Christians in Eritrea and Ahmadia Muslims in Iran. This report provides further specific examples of this tendency.

The majority of the respondents to SMC’s questionnaire represent an FBO (80%). It should be noted that both SMC and NORFORB are faith-based actors with a Christian identity. This is also the case for many of their partner organisations.

## LEVEL OF CIVIC SPACE AND FoRB VIOLATIONS AT COUNTRY LEVEL

**CIVICUS’ INDEX FOR** civic space categorised three of the 29 countries<sup>16</sup> included in the survey as closed, ten as repressed and 15 as obstructed.<sup>17</sup> In comparison, seven of the 29 countries included in the survey were characterised by a very high level of FoRB violations, 14 countries by a high level of violations, whereas four countries were on a moderate level and three countries on a very low level, according to SMC’s categories, based on Pew Research Center 2019.<sup>18</sup>

When comparing the two maps, it is interesting to note that in some countries there are differences between civic space and FoRB rankings. For example, in both India and Nigeria,

civic space was categorised as obstructed, whereas the level of FoRB violations was considered very high. At the same time, in Togo and Peru the levels of FoRB violations were very low, whereas the countries were categorised as obstructed in relation to civic space. Even though it is not possible to draw any general conclusions based on this small sample, these differences highlight the need to find out more about the correlation between civic space and FoRB. They also highlight the need for research on civic space to include FoRB violations in order to provide a more accurate and comprehensive picture.

# Trends and experiences of shrinking civic space and FoRB violations

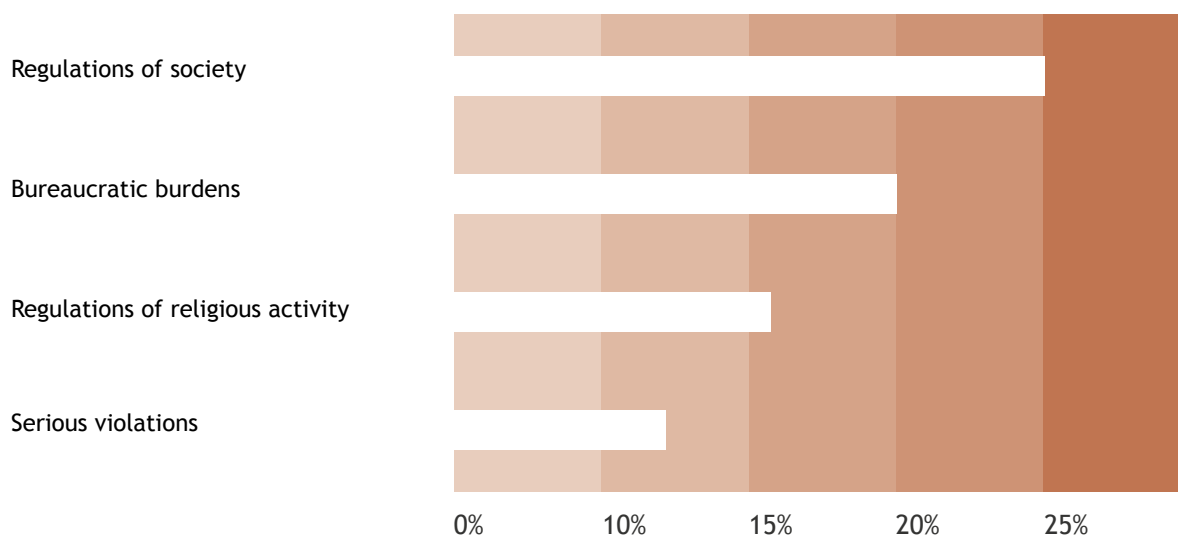
## CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTIONS AFFECTING CSOs

### STATE ACTORS RESTRICTING CIVIC SPACE

According to 43% of the respondents, state actors tried to hinder or slow down their work during the period 2017-2018. The three most common ways in which these organisations experienced civic space restrictions from state actors are:

- formal constraints through restrictive regulations and legislations regarding civil society in general;
- increasing administrative or bureaucratic burdens;
- formal constraints through restrictive regulations and legislations in relation to religion and religious organisations.

12% of the respondents have experienced serious violations conducted by state actors, including violence or threats of violence, harassments and hate and smear campaigns directed towards staff/organisation members/beneficiaries or infrastructure. One example is Tanzania which you can read more about on the following page.





## TANZANIA – civil society facing increased state restrictions

Approximately 61% of Tanzania's more than 55 million inhabitants are Christians, 35% are Muslims and 4% belong to other religious groups.<sup>19</sup> Since 2015, Tanzania has become a more authoritarian regime, with increased restrictions of civic space, affect-

ing the freedom of citizens, civil society actors, journalists etc. Opposition parties have been restricted and security forces have used excessive force towards peaceful assemblies.<sup>20</sup>



**ONE OF THE RESPONDENTS** from Tanzania describes the challenging situation in her country. She works with a Christian organisation and confirms that state actors have tried to slow down and hinder their work in different ways. Her organisation has experienced increasing administrative and bureaucratic burdens, with more permissions required to implement its work. Inaction by state actors is another challenge, for example when the

government does not adhere to agreed Memoranda of Understanding.

The woman describes how her organisation has been exposed to false accusations of taking a stand for the opposition; but also to on-line hatred and smear campaigns where made up stories are spread with the purpose to limit the organisation's mission and messages.



Photo: SMC

Government authorities have from time to time imposed travel bans towards the organisation. State actors have even used violence or threats of violence directed at the organisation's members and infrastructure. Another way for state actors to destabilise civil society in Tanzania,

mentioned by our respondent, is the use of bribes to silence NGO leaders. This creates mistrust between different civil society organisations.



## NON-STATE ACTORS RESTRICTING CIVIC SPACE

One fifth of the respondents state that non-state actors (e.g. social movements, political actors, religious groups, corporations, illegal armed groups, criminal elements) tried to hinder or slow down their work during 2017-2018.

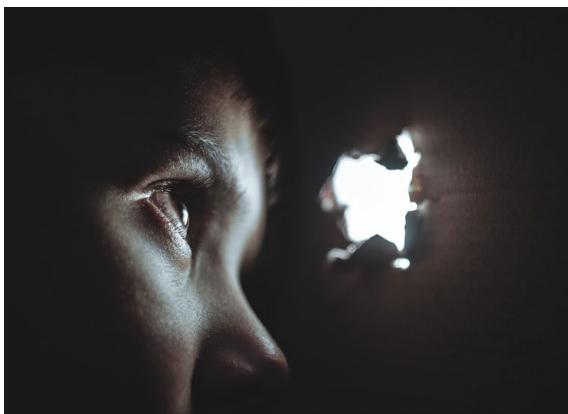


Photo: Pixabay.

In all cases except one, these respondents testify about serious violations conducted by non-state actors; including violence or threats of violence, kidnapping, harassments, as well as hate and smear campaigns. Most of the non-state

actors mentioned are linked to violent conflicts or political instability in the country or region where the respondents work.

One respondent from Cameroon shares how armed groups have restricted civic space for their organisation:

*– Some of our staff or their family members have been kidnapped and only released after payment of ransom. They were harassed by separatists. Some staff have been arrested and questioned by the military before being released.*

Another example from a respondent in South-Central Asia illustrates the difficulty of working in a conflict setting where non-state actors pose security threats and state actors fail to provide security:

*– We live and work in a war-torn nation with many different opposition groups and political actors. The government is not able to bring these under control or in any other way guarantee our safety.*

## BURKINA FASO – living with restrictions and fear

**BURKINA FASO** is one of the world's poorest countries. Approximately 60% of its 20 million people are Muslims, 20% are Catholics, around 4% belong to Protestant churches and 15% practice indigenous beliefs.<sup>21</sup> Since 2015, Burkina Faso has experienced an increase in religiously motivated attacks and kidnappings by different terrorist groups,

both national and transnational. The terrorist attacks have been directed towards both Muslim and Christian communities.<sup>22</sup> Due to the many attacks in the northern and eastern part of the country, the number of internally displaced people increased dramatically during 2018-2019.<sup>23</sup>



**ONE OF THE ORGANISATIONS**, in the survey, is trying to navigate in this difficult context. The organisation is faith-based with a Christian identity and has worked in Burkina Faso for 27 years. Its CEO states:

*– The terrorist groups are really armed and when they enter the villages they kill the men.*

*I live in the capital, Ouagadougou, but driving for one hour and a half, it's becoming very dangerous. So we have problems to continue our programmes properly. You need to hide yourself and hide what you are doing.*



Children at school in Namentenga, Burkina Faso  
Photo: Boureima Salouka.



*This [providing security] is the responsibility of the government; they really need to secure the country. But when you go to the villages there is no presence of militaries or police officers. If I have to go to the very dangerous area, I have to hire the security.*

*Since we are a Christian organisation we have some trouble. The terrorist groups attacked churches and killed some pastors, religious people in my country. I went to the north and I met two hundred pastors who had left their villages because of the situation. It was very hard to see how they had to leave their villages.*

*More than 2500 schools have been closed in the country, with 350 000 children not able to go to school anymore and the armed groups could recruit these children.*

**What happens if you are part of the Muslim community and you take an open stance against the terrorist groups?**

*Then you are in double danger. They become more aggressive to you than to Christians, because they couldn't understand that you try to fight against them.*



## CONCLUSION — Civic space restrictions affecting CSOs

According to the respondents, non-state actors are to a greater extent than state actors directly responsible for serious violations in relation to both civic space and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

However, the state's responsibility to protect human rights and democracy includes responsibility to limit the negative impact that non-state actors have on civic space and FoRB. When state actors are committed to

democracy, enabling space for civil society and working proactively for FoRB, the room for non-state actors with opposite agendas in these aspects shrinks.

State actors therefore need to balance restrictions on non-state actors' criminal/terrorist activities carefully with approaches that safeguard and promote civic space, democracy and FoRB. Fragile states will need extensive support through this process.



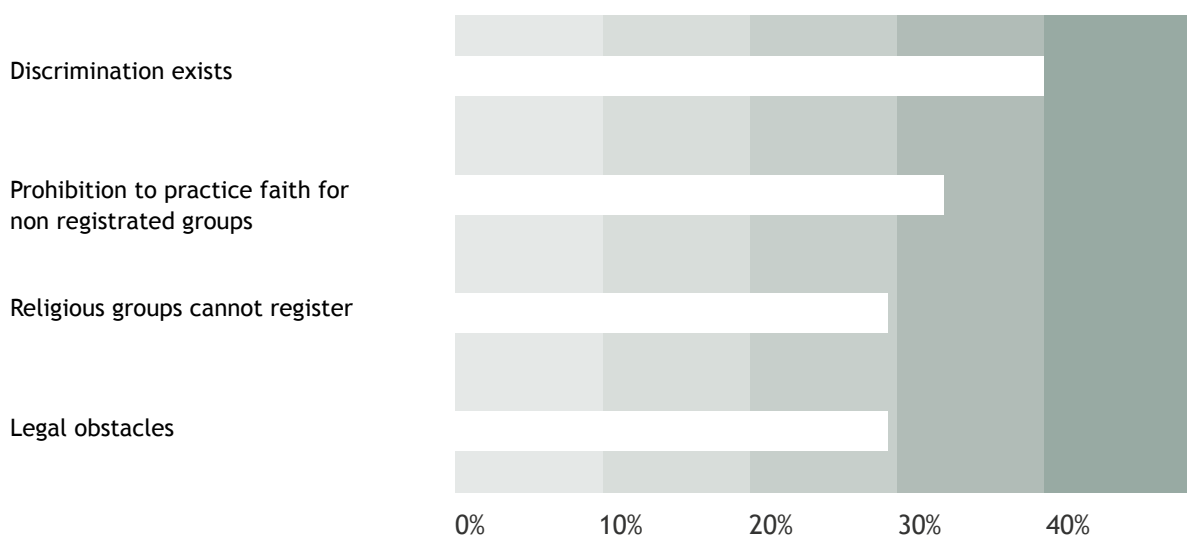
## VIOLATIONS OF FoRB

### GENERAL PROBLEMS OF FoRB VIOLATIONS

One fifth of the respondents indicate serious problems regarding violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in their context, and almost two thirds state that there are some problems. One tenth of the responding organisations do not see any problems.

The four most common FoRB violations identified are:

- Discrimination exists and the government does not intervene even though the law prohibits discrimination.
- Only religious organisations registered with the government are allowed to practice their faith.
- Certain religious/faith groups cannot register as legal entities.
- Authorities uphold legal or other procedural obstacles for building places of worship.



The experiences and analyses of the respondents do not fully coincide with those of external observers. For example, in DRC, external observers assess the society as closed with high levels of FoRB problems. However the two responding organisations from DRC in SMC's survey share no experiences of civic space restrictions from state or non-state actors. One of the respondents from DRC makes the following reflection:

*Most FBOs are well respected in DRC because they are the main providers of projects fighting against extreme poverty. A majority of politicians benefited from the work of FBOs in one way or another in their lives.*

These discrepancies between the responding organisations and external observers' analyses could have different explanations. So-



Photo: John Benitez.

cial factors, such as belonging to a majority or minority religious group, could lead to different experiences of the situation. The examples from DRC indicate that the respondents belong to a majority religious group, and are therefore not as affected by FoRB violations or shrinking civic space. Another important explanation could be the level of awareness about the situation for people with a different religious identity.

## CONCLUSION — General problems of FoRB violations

The results of the survey highlight the importance of context specific analyses of FoRB violations. The results also indicate that a faith-based identity does not automatically generate a greater awareness of FoRB as a human right.

SMC's experience from working with capacity building on FoRB around the world, is that the level of knowledge is often rather low among CSOs, other development actors, as well as decision-makers.

## EXPERIENCES OF FoRB VIOLATIONS – A DIVERSE PICTURE

The number of responding organisations with direct experiences of violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) was surprisingly low, given the level of violations of FoRB in the countries concerned (see map on page 10). Only one fifth of the respondents confirm that FoRB violations had affected their organisations directly during 2017-2018. At the same time, almost two thirds of the respondents state that there are some kinds of FoRB problems in their context.

To get a better understanding of the result, several aspects need consideration. One explanation could be that the respondents are relating experiences of FoRB violations to an individual rather than an organisational level. Another hypothesis is that organisations and people affected by FoRB restrictions might not be aware of FoRB as a human right. They might normalise the situation without perceiving illegitimate limitations as direct violations.

Even when people and organisations are aware of FoRB, they tend to adapt to the situation and develop corresponding strategies in order to avoid violations. Another explanation could be that the majority of the responding organisations do not experience any FoRB violations because they are not part of the religious group(s) affected by these violations. Probably, the answer is a combination of these and other factors. Clearly, this is an issue that needs further investigation.

In contrast, among the responding organisations who have their own experiences of direct FoRB violations, some highlight serious problems. The following narrative is from an organisation in West Asia:

*We have had to severely restrict our expression of personal belief. People are followed, phones tapped. We have friends who are pastors who were put into prison and then had to leave the country. [...] Their church buildings were also closed and sealed. When a staff member expressed interest in becoming a follower of Jesus, he was beaten on the streets.*

An organisation based in the MENA region describes the challenges of hiring staff members who are not affiliated with the majority religion:

*Local Christians are second-class citizens blocked from the hiring process by government controls. We cannot hire non-Muslims, or specifically Christians.*



In countries with restricted civic space, SMC and its partners work with capacity building around FoRB using a tool for religious literacy. Illustration © Majsan Sundell

## BANGLADESH — FoRB violations affecting women's rights

**BANGLADESH** has more than 160 million inhabitants. The great majority of these, 89%, are Sunni Muslims, 10% are Hindus and the remaining population includes Christians, Buddhists, Shia Muslims and other groups.<sup>24</sup> Bangladesh is one of seven countries included in the survey with a very high level of FoRB violations.<sup>25</sup> Hindus, Buddhists,

Christians and other minority religious groups have reported property and land ownership disputes and forced evictions. The reported violations of minority rights involve death threats, killings, kidnappings and attacks on homes and places of worship.<sup>26</sup>



**FARZANA MAHMOOD** is an Advocate of the Bangladesh Supreme Court and the Executive Director of Bangladesh Manobadhikar O Poribesh Andolan (BAMAPA), an NGO working on human and environmental rights. Farzana highlights the importance of understanding that FoRB is a human right for everyone, not only for religious minority groups:

*– There is a common misconception in Bangladesh that FoRB only protects religious minorities. But FoRB protects the rights of every individual to practice his or her religion and for every religious community to maintain its religious institutions. FoRB is closely linked to other civil rights, including the right to freedom of expression and conscience, the right to non-discrimination and right to liberty.*



Farzana Mahmood, photo: private.



**LUCILLE SIRCAR** is the Program Director of Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) Bangladesh, which has a history of almost 50 years in the country. According to Lucille, development organisations sometimes face mistrust at community level. Faith-based organisations affiliated with a minority religion can be viewed with even more suspicion:

*When we enter a new area for our projects, it is common that we face resistance. Influential community leaders perceive us as a threat towards their systems and religion, since we are a faith-based Christian organisation. We always strive to have teams of staff that represent different religious groups to promote acceptance and tolerance. Gradually, when we have time to explain how we work, the reception of our projects is so welcoming, that you would be amazed.*

Lucille highlights that FoRB violations not only affect minority groups, but also the majority groups, since women from different religions are affected:

*Women are vulnerable in the society because of socio-economic factors, as well as religious systems and structures. At a general level, women are less recognised and have fewer opportunities in society, in comparison with men. If a woman belongs to a minority religious group, she is exposed to double discrimination. Moreover, if a girl or woman wants to change her religion, in most cases it means that she has to leave her family, whereas boys and men face less restrictions regarding the freedom to change religion.*



Lucille Sircar, photo: ADRA Bangladesh.

*My analysis is that men are balancing between the family and the social system, where they feel pushed to ensure that no family member is breaking the community rules, which is a sign of being a “good man”. I think this is a frustrating situation for men who wish to contribute to women’s rights, but find themselves compromising their standpoint due to pressure from traditional structures and attitudes.*



## FORB ANALYSIS NEEDS A STRONG GENDER DIMENSION

According to two fifths of the respondents, FoRB violations affect men and women differently in their context. As explained by one responding organisation from Nigeria:

*I believe women are more affected. The general belief is that a woman essentially does not have a religion and should practice her husband's religion.*

*In ten of the countries included in the survey, the respondents highlight gender related FoRB violations, whereas the corresponding external country analyses lack this information.*

Within the international FoRB community, the crosscutting connection between FoRB and gender has gained more attention during the last years.

At the same time, these results indicate that external expert analyses of FoRB still need to strengthen the overall gender integration.



ADRA Bangladesh Community mapping exercise in Manikganj District. Photo: ADRA Bangladesh.

## CONCLUSION — Experiences of FoRB violations — a diverse picture

The number of organisations with experiences of violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) was surprisingly low given the level of FoRB violations in the countries concerned (see map on page 10). There are different possible explanations for this. Organisations with direct experiences of FoRB violations do however describe severe restrictions. The experiences from Bangladesh highlight how FoRB violations affect people from both

minority and majority religious groups. They also illustrate that women in general, as well as minority groups, are particularly exposed to FoRB violations. Such exposure further affects the access to civic space for these groups. Finally, the Bangladeshi example underlines the need for a FoRB and gender sensitive approach to civic space analyses, as well as the need for improved gender integration in FoRB analyses.





Women running market gardens in the desert of Zagofina, Mali. Photo: Izla Bethdavid Boltana.

## SPECIFIC CHALLENGES FOR FBOs AS COMPARED TO SECULAR CSOs

**THE RESULTS FROM** the survey provide a multifaceted picture of how responding organisations perceive possible differences between how shrinking space affects faith-based organisations (FBOs) and secular civil society organisations (CSOs).

Shrinking civic space affects secular CSOs and FBOs equally according to nearly one third of the respondents. Some of the answers highlight how other factors determine the level of exposure to restrictions and attacks on civil society. For example, work related to human rights is more risky for both secular CSOs and FBOs than “hard ware” projects, focusing on water, building schools or hospitals. Both state and non-state actors consider such types of work more harmless. As explained by one respondent from Malawi:

*Attacks on civil society affect FBOs and secular CSOs depending on the work they are doing. Work that has to do with human rights and accountability is sometimes disliked by people in power.*

16% state that FBOs have an advantageous position, making them less vulnerable to shrinking civic space, in comparison to secular CSOs

in the same context. Some respondents attribute this advantageous position to an affiliation with the country’s majority religion.

Almost one third of the respondents experience FBOs as more affected by restrictions and attacks on civil society in comparison to secular CSOs. Respondents from some South Asian countries highlight difficulties to act as a Christian FBO in relation to anti-conversion laws.<sup>27</sup> These laws, in combination with social suspicion that the work of these organisations aims at converting people, limit their civic space. One of the respondents from India shares the challenges of FBOs affiliated to minority religions in the country:

*In India, there are fundamental groups, which promote a particular religion and become violent towards minority groups, mostly faith-based groups. This happens with a rationale that these faith-based groups are being involved in promoting their own religions, which is not exactly true.*

## NEPAL – the fear of conversions

NEPAL has almost 30 million inhabitants, of which 81% are Hindus. The second most common religion is Buddhism, followed by Islam. Christians make up less than 2% of the population.<sup>28</sup> The current constitution establishes Nepal as a secular federal state. However, the definition of secularism is debated since the constitution refers to “protection of the age-old religion and culture”, which could be interpreted as favouring

Hinduism. Christian groups in the country have reported difficulties to register or operate as NGOs and Muslim and Christian communities have faced problems to buy or use land for burials.<sup>29</sup> In 2018, a draft National Integrity Policy was proposed; if passed it would limit the civic space for international and national secular CSOs and FBOs.<sup>30</sup>



**MADHU THAPA WORKS WITH THE** Christian organisation United Mission to Nepal (UMN), founded in 1954. Madhu describes the civic space restrictions that Christian development organisations face in Nepal:

*Just to give you an example, one of our local partners has “Christian” in their name of the organisation, and the government was not happy with that. The message was that if you have the word Christian in the name of an organisation, it is not neutral and therefore you can’t have a partnership (registration renewal) with the government.*

*There have been cases where people who were [in the villages] just to preach the gospel or doing development work for a FBO were charged with converting people forcefully and therefore they were put in prison or persecuted. There was a case study where one woman in our literacy programme said*

*“I can read the Bible now”. One government employee interpreted that as converting. And therefore, they [the government] created problems in our partnership and it took quite a long time for us to explain.*



Madhu Thapa, photo: Mikael Jägerskog, PMU.



*She was a Christian lady and if she can read the Bible, she can read anything.*

When analysing the reasons behind these restrictions, Madhu refers to Nepal's Constitution and its article about protecting the age-old religion:

*When the government experience a threat to this, there is pressure.*

At the same time, Madhu highlights the need and possibility for civil society actors to work together and create positive changes; for example regarding the proposed Integrity Policy:

*[It was stopped], because NGOs as well as INGOs lobbied together and tried to explain to the government the irrelevance of the legislation. After that it has not been enacted.*



People praying in a temple in South Asia.  
Photo: Kevin Bluer.



## MOLDOVA – a fragmented civil society

IN 1991, MOLDOVA declared its independence from the Soviet Union. The young nation has 3.5 million inhabitants, of which 90% are Orthodox Christians. Around 7% of the population are religiously un-affiliated. Among the non-Orthodox religious groups are Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pen-

tecostals.<sup>31</sup> The Moldovan Constitution protects FoRB. At the same time, the Law on Religious Denominations recognizes “the special importance and leading role of the Orthodox Christian religion”. The same law also bans “abusive proselytism”.<sup>32</sup>



**BEGINNING OF LIFE** is a faith based organisation (FBO) that has worked in Moldova for almost 20 years. Veniamin Sazonov, Project Coordinator, explains that civil society in Moldova is fragmented:

*Few organisations see the importance of a strong and united civil society. This leads to a lack of cooperation between civil society actors. One important explanation to this lies in the experiences during the Communist period, when churches and other civil society organisations were under pressure. Some were even persecuted.*

Most of the FBOs in Moldova have a Christian identity and the majority are connected with Evangelical churches. These organisations mainly focus on assistance to the most vulnerable groups in society, for example by providing shelter. However, they are seldom active in public debate and do not perceive themselves as part of civil society:

*We as FBOs don't see ourselves as key actors who can influence public policy*

*or shape the civil society in Moldova. We don't talk about advocacy or participation in policy development. At the same time, the state and other civil society actors do not expect anything else from FBOs than humanitarian assistance. Therefore, this needs reformation from both sides.*

Both the legislation and existing social attitudes about proselytism make it difficult for the organisation to take a more active role in civil society.

*The local government “recommended” us to suspend our activities in public schools, where we raise awareness on issues like gender equality, human trafficking and HIV and aids. The background to this decision was the assumption that we engaged in proselytism, which is not true.*

*We have explained to the Ministry of Education that our work does not involve any proselytism.*





Veniamin Sazonov, conducting a seminar for teachers in a public school in Baurchi, Moldova. Photo: Beginning of Life.

*Due to the misconceptions relating to our Christian identity, we do not present ourselves as an FBO, but as an NGO when we relate to different actors in Moldova.*

Despite the challenges, Veniamin looks at the future with hope:

*We want to be an active part of the society and work together with other organisations. Networking will contribute to public policy making, or at least influencing public opinion about the problems. That is our dream and we are moving in that direction.*



## CONCLUSION – Specific challenges for FBOs as compared to secular CSOs

The responding organisations make diverse analyses of why and how faith based organisations (FBO) and secular civil society organisations (CSO) are exposed differently to shrinking civic space. The example from Nepal highlights the challenges for Christian, and other FBOs affiliated with religious mino-

rities, to work in a context filled with suspicion regarding the motives of their development work. The Moldovan example shows that FoRB violations relating to laws and attitudes about proselytism, which further limits access to civic space, are also present in Europe.

## Strategies used to fight shrinking space and FoRB violations

**THERE ARE MANY EXAMPLES** of how organisations manage shrinking civic space and/or violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) around the world. These are the most common strategies used by the organisations who participated in the survey:

- advocacy for legal improvements;
- training of religious communities/ leaders on access to justice;
- interreligious dialogue and;
- dialogue with state actors.

Other strategies mentioned are: provision of legal support in order to claim rights, engagement with international actors, keeping a low profile and adaptation of language in order to go under the radar.

In situations of shrinking civic space and increasing FoRB violations, organisations seem to develop a kind of “resilience” towards restrictions. Many organisations have worked in their respective context for a long time, which often means they are well known and respected. Highlighted key strategies among these organisations are relationship building with local authorities and religious leaders from different faiths.

They also promote community participation and transparency about the content and purpose of their organisation’s work.

### COMBINING SOFT AND HARD COMPONENTS

As mentioned above, state actors sometimes have a more accepting attitude towards organisations working with service delivery or “hard ware” compared to those focusing on capacity building or advocacy for human rights. At the same time, organisations with a good track record in service delivery state that they are able to access decision-makers for dialogue. This is illustrated by an organisation working in the MENA region:

*In general, authorities and non-state groups welcome infrastructure projects and are suspicious of social “meddling” projects. But if the soft components are combined with hard components, opposition can be appeased when they see positive results. Women’s rights, for example, have slowly improved over the years.*



Meeting of Tanzania’s SDGs Youth Ambassadors who take part in the global ecumenical initiative Waking the Giant. Photo: Kerstin Bergeå, Act Church of Sweden.



## NETWORKING TO CLAIM MORE SPACE

The majority of the responding organisations are part of national networks for civil society organisations or other types of coalitions. Most of the strategies mentioned require co-operation and dialogue with other actors, both within civil society and with state actors. Respondents express the need to increase collaboration in an environment of shrinking civic space, particularly when it comes to advocacy and dialogue with state actors. One of the respondents from Malawi describes the importance of belonging to networks:

*We are part of several networks/coalitions. These are of great importance as you are able to fight with one voice for a common goal. If it is an advocacy assignment more noise is better and it's difficult to shrug it off. For example, the AIDS Interfaith Network has made a lot of strides by having one voice.*

In South Asia, the network SaFFoRB brings together CSOs of six countries in the region to advocate on FoRB and related issues. As explained by Farzana Mahmood, who is one of the board members:



Photo: ERIKS development partner, India.

*It's a new platform, which gives us an important opportunity to monitor the FoRB situation in the region. From this forum we write reports to the different stakeholders of FoRB, including UN, if there is any violation or concern regarding FoRB.*

## SELF-SENSORSHIP FOR SECURITY REASONS

Responding organisations in different parts of the world share experiences of how their name and Christian identity restrict their civic space and force them to hide these for strategic purposes. In Burkina Faso, the challenge exists due to the insecurity caused by terrorist groups:

*The mayor of the city advised us that we need to take out our logo from our vehicle. Through our logo, our Christian identity is visible and they [terrorist groups] could attack us, so this was actually a good advice.*

One of the respondents from Bangladesh highlights the importance of creating awareness among religious leaders at local and national level, enabling them to become change agents:

*Religious leaders might think they are doing the right thing, but in reality their actions might violate FoRB. So their mindset and understanding needs to be influenced, so that tolerance and peace can be promoted through these influential people.*





Photo: SMC.

## CONCLUSION – Strategies used to fight shrinking space and FoRB violations

The organisations apply a number of different strategies depending on the situation and its specific challenges. Due to threats from both state and non-state actors, some are forced to hide part of their identity. Others emphasise transparency and legal support in order to claim rights as key strategies. Several

organisations mention networking as an important method, not the least when it comes to advocacy and dialogue with state actors. At the same time, organisations have to manage the balancing act between maintaining a good dialogue with local authorities and speaking out for change.



## Appendix 1. The Survey

**THE QUESTIONNAIRE** used in the survey consists of 18 closed and open-ended questions regarding civic space and FoRB. In order to protect the respondents, the questionnaire was filled in anonymously via the digital tool Zoho. In the final question, SMC asked the respondents for permission to quote their responses anonymously. This report only includes quotes from respondents who have permitted citations and from in-depth interviews with persons that have given permission for us to share their quotations. Some interviewees requested to be anonymous due to security risks and some gave their permission to include their name and the name of their organisation.

SMC received more than 70 responses, but due to incompleteness, not all of them could be included in the analysis. SMC has removed responses where only introductory background questions were answered.

Both SMC and NORFORB are faith-based actors with a Christian identity and so are many of the partner organisations that responded to the questionnaire. It is likely that some of the organisations that participated in the survey have other religious identities and/or have staff representing different religious communities. The questionnaire did however not include questions regarding religious affiliation.

To receive a copy of the questionnaire please contact SMC at [info@smc.global](mailto:info@smc.global).

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- 15 For further discussion on the term faith-based, see Sider & Unruh, 2004 in *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 33. no. 1.
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- 17 CIVICUS, November 2018: *People Power Under Attack. A Global Analysis of Threats to Fundamental Freedoms*. This report presents country levels of civic space as per November 2018, which is towards the end of the period covered by the questionnaire.
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**SMC — FAITH IN DEVELOPMENT** is a Swedish umbrella organisation for churches and faith-based organisations. The 32 member organisations of SMC constitute a broad network of organisations from different church traditions. Through agreements with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), SMC channels funds to development and humanitarian projects in 50 countries around the world. These projects are implemented by SMC's member organisations and their local partners.

### **PROMOTING FoRB FOR ALL IN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION**

SMC seeks to address the global need for increased knowledge and understanding of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as a human right for all.

Extensive advocacy and capacity building work is conducted in SMC's own name but also in cooperation with others.

One important partner to SMC is NORFORB and its' FORB Learning Platform: [www.forb-learning.org](http://www.forb-learning.org).

The FORB Learning Platform provides free of charge resources to help individuals, communities and decision-makers learn, reflect upon and promote freedom of religion or belief for all. The platform includes resources for personal study and for group trainings.

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SMC believes that religious literacy is key for sustainable partnerships and social change in a world where religion plays a part in most people's lives - rich and poor.

That is why SMC proudly presents a Toolbox for religious literacy! It is designed to aid any organisation that wants an advanced understanding of its own identity in relation to religion. It also seeks to deepen your understanding of the role and various identities of religious actors encountered in specific contexts.

SMC describes religious literacy as *An understanding that beliefs and religious actors play a significant role in shaping society, and our ability to relate to and work with these ideas and actors.*

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