



# Terms of Reference for the Nordic Ecumenical Network on Freedom of Religion or Belief (NORFORB)

## Introduction

The Nordic Ecumenical Network on Freedom of Religion or Belief (NORFORB) is a network of ecumenical, church- or church-related organisations in the Nordic Countries who work with international freedom of religion or belief (FORB) as a human right for all.

Collaboration in the network takes place on the basis of a shared understanding of FORB as a human right for all as stated in UDHR art. 18, ICCPR art.18 and ECHR art.9.

The network focuses on international freedom of religion or belief, not on domestic FORB issues. There are however areas of overlap which relate to both domestic and international agendas that may be discussed within the network.

The network seeks to be open, practical and solution-driven, with collaboration based on shared values, aims and ways of working and in which there is freedom for the members (or groups of members) to explore, develop and implement initiatives organically.

## Assumptions for cooperation

Cooperation within the NORFORB network is based on the assumption that FORB as a human right is essential for building any free, democratic and peaceful society. Joint learning and collaboration inspire efficient, relevant and innovative approaches towards the realization of FORB as a human right for all.

The cooperation of the network rests on four pillars:

1. We believe in a Human Rights based approach working on international FORB issues.  
The NORFORB network believes that broad based support for FORB as a human right for all is fundamental, both in principle and in practice, having a stronger impact at all levels. This means that advocacy actions should be unbiased and evidence-based, reflecting the totality of situations rather than narrow interests. It also means that we are open to cooperate and coordinate with likeminded initiatives, regardless of their religious or belief background.
2. We believe in coordinating support and capacity development towards duty bearers and towards rights holders.  
Both duty bearers and rights holders around the world lack knowledge and understanding of FORB, its significance for development and democracy, and of methods for promotion. Knowledge and appreciation of the value of the right are pre-requisites for change. We believe the support and capacity development work of member organisations and of their partners will have a greater impact if efforts and

initiatives are coordinated, synergy effects explored and utilised, and such efforts and initiatives are seen as complementary to each other.

3. We believe in linking local and international levels.

Through its capacity building work, NORFORB members are in touch with rights holders at the local level in contexts where freedom of religion or belief is violated. It is important to strengthen the ability of these actors to speak up for themselves. Through wide reaching contacts and coordination, the NORFORB network can also link local actors to national and international decision makers, and in that way, both increase the contextual understanding of decision makers as well as amplifying the voice of local rights holders.

4. We believe in sharing learning and innovation.

Within the NORFORB network we believe that common learning and reflection strengthen all the members and reinforce the impact of both advocacy and capacity development work. It inspires relevant, conflict sensitive, efficient and innovative approaches and resources towards the realization of FORB for all. As an ecumenical network, NORFORB sees added value in exploring the linkages between faith-based identities and approaches and a human rights-based approach in promoting FORB.

## **Aim & objectives**

The overall aim of the network is to maximize the efficacy and efficiency of the participating organisations' work on FORB for all by identifying and utilizing potential synergies among network members. In this way our joint contribution to building a culture of FORB for all will be strengthened.

The NORFORB network has the following strategic objectives:

- Sharing, exchanging, inspiring new ideas and innovative approaches
- Joint learning on best practices
- Complementarity and collaboration to strengthen synergy effects and thereby boost the effectiveness of the member organisations' FORB work
- Joining a faith-based identity and approach with a human rights-based approach towards FORB.

These objectives should guide the network's rules of engagement and modes of cooperation.

## **Operational areas and examples of activities**

The collaboration in NORFORB is centred around four operational areas and can include the following activities:

### Advocacy

- Joint cooperation on advocacy targeting Nordic decision makers, decision makers at the EU and UN levels as well as other multilateral organisations e.g., the UPR process.
- Co-hosting of international guests in relation to advocacy activities.

### Capacity development

- Finding synergy effects through collaboration, formulating shared ideas and lessons learned on capacity development including methodology and strategy development.
- Collaboration in development of learning resources making them available via the FORB Learning Platform.
- Facilitating international exchanges between local partners on FORB in order to strengthen capacities and encourage mutual learning.
- Having joint capacity development events when suitable.

### Knowledge and experience exchange

- Joint study trips.
- Sharing learnings and best practices with each other; sharing resources.
- Explore links between FORB and other relevant topics, such as development/SDGs; faith-based identities, theology and approaches to FORB; gender equality; peace building; democracy and shrinking space etc.

### Networking

- Inspire and be inspired by other networks/stakeholders/key players and coordinate our efforts with them when relevant.
- Identification of complementary funding for activities that can strengthen the overall objectives of NORFORB, e.g., through joint grant applications.

## **Membership and rules of engagement**

### **Criteria and application process**

Based on its identity and the founding principles, NORFORB is a network open for members that fulfil the following criteria:

- Are ecumenical, church or church-related organisations, and organisations with a Christian basis.
- Have their head offices in a Nordic country.
- Work practically with advocacy, capacity building, knowledge development, the development of learning resources, or support partners' work to promote international freedom of religion or belief.
- Work in a manner that clearly profiles FORB as a human right for all.
- Agree to the Terms of Reference by signing the ToR.

Organisations that fulfil the above-mentioned criteria are welcome to apply to become a member following the steps below:

1. Applications are made to the lead organisation of the annual host country at the time of application. The application should explain and elaborate on how the applying organisation fulfils the above-mentioned criteria. The application should be dated and signed by the head of the organisation.
2. The lead organisation at the time of application is responsible for preparing information about the applicant, their work to promote FORB for all and their reputation in advance of one of the two regular meetings.
3. Decisions regarding membership are taken by the members at one of the regular NORFORB network meetings. The list of members is attached (Annex 1) and updated when needed.
4. Sign ToR and send for storage by lead organisation of the annual host country.
5. When a new member has been approved, the lead organisation sends the new member a welcome package, including information about access to the joint online documentation platform of the network.

### Membership fee

There is an annual membership fee which applies to full members of the network and not observing organisations. The membership fee ensures the financial sustainability of NORFORB's joint project - the FORB Learning Platform.

The membership fee is currently 10.000 SEK and is decided by members at the annual spring meeting for the following financial period on basis of a provided budget. Payments are due before the next annual spring meeting at which a full report of income and expenditure is shared and approved. In the event of a surplus of funds, the use of such funds will be decided

by members attending the meeting.

Invoices are sent out by the NORFORB-organisation that holds the contracts for the maintenance of the FORB Learning Platform website and other essential services for the project.

If an organisation is unable to become or remain a member due to lack of financial capacity to pay the membership fee, the organisation may negotiate a lower membership fee on basis of a fair share principle. In such cases, a request should be sent to the lead organisation which, in consultation with the organisation administrating the fee, will negotiate the fee. An agreed lower fee does not affect the membership of the organisation in any other way.

### Observers

The member organisations can, in consultation with the lead organisation of the annual host country, invite individuals to participate in the meetings and activities of the network. In addition, Nordic organisations that consider applying for membership can participate in network meetings as observers invited by the lead organisation of the annual host country. After participation in 3 network meetings the observer must decide whether they would like to apply to become a member. The decision must be made before the next physical network meeting. Observers can participate in planning meetings, in discussions, but do not have voting rights.

## Rules of engagement

- The member organisations' different identities and organizational structures are to be respected.
- Member organisations' different capacities and ambition levels in relation to the work of the network are to be respected. Each member organisation chooses whether or not to participate in network activities on the basis of the activities' relevance to the organisation and its internal and financial capacity. All members commit to responding to email correspondence pertaining to decisions that require the consent of the network as a whole.
- NORFORB is a network of the willing and as such its purpose is its main reason for existing. Care should therefore be taken not to develop any unnecessarily heavy organisational structures.
- Regardless of the scale of different member organisations' commitments to network activities, these commitments are to be reliable. Once a member organisation has made a commitment to contribute towards a commonly set task their commitment is expected to be backed by the necessary organisational management ownership and fulfilled. However, generosity and flexibility for unexpected events should always be present in network members' interactions with each other.
- Network members share responsibility for ensuring that the network's continuing development is sustainable and organic, both in terms of number of members and in terms of joint activities. This could involve limiting the number of new members or the number of funding applications made in NORFORBs name for a specified period of time.
- All network members are seen as being able and competent NORFORB representatives.
- Each participating organisation covers its own costs in relation to participation in network meetings and activities. This applies also to individuals and observers invited to participate in the network.
- Information about partners in countries with severe violations of FORB is to be regarded confidential and can't be shared without the consent of the member organisation who shared it.

## Practical cooperation

### Network meetings

The network meets twice per year, in which one is a physical meeting in the spring in one of the Nordic countries and the second is a digital meeting in the autumn. Member organisations are expected to participate in network meetings as this is the primary decision-making structure of the network.

Responsibility to prepare for and facilitate the network meetings rotates among the Nordic countries on an annual basis. The upcoming annual host country for the next year is appointed at the spring meeting each year. The members of the annual host country are responsible to appoint a lead organisation among themselves.

The lead organisation, in collaboration with the members of the annual host country, is responsible for deciding on the agenda for the network meetings. Other member organisations are free to suggest agenda items to the lead organisation of the host country.

At the spring meeting, the following agenda items should be included:

- Principal discussions and decisions affecting the whole network, including:
  - Membership applications
  - Funding applications
- Follow up of the work of sub-groups from the previous year
- Membership fees (report of income and expenditure)

- Interaction that encourages experience sharing, exchange and synergies.
- Time for sub-groups to meet.
- Present the dates for the autumn meeting.
- Appoint the upcoming year's annual host country.

. The lead organisation has the following responsibility:

- Convene planning meetings.
- Be the point of contact for new observers and others.
- Have its contact information be shared on the NORFORB subpage of the FORB Learning Platform.
- Keep NORFORBs member list updated, incl. notifying organisations that have become passive members.
- Negotiate membership fees (if needed)

On the autumn meeting, the lead organisation, in collaboration with next year's annual host country, present dates for the coming spring meeting.

Member(s) are considered passive and will be removed from the list of members if they have not attended any meetings in 3 years (6 consecutive meetings). Should the organisation(s) want to become active again, it must reapply. The lead organisation of the annual host country is responsible for notifying passive members and update NORFORBs member list accordingly.

For decisions made on regular network meetings, a majority of the attending organisations must agree.

In situations where urgent decisions that concern all members of the network need to be taken before the next scheduled network meeting, organisations concerned can call for immediate decision making either by:

- raising the question concerned with all network members over e-mail.
- calling for an extraordinary network online meeting.

For such decisions to be valid and representative for the network as a whole, the majority of the answers received before the deadline has to be in favour of the decision or a majority of the attending organisations have to agree. Those who are not able to attend, have to actively express their disagreement ahead of the meeting. Silence is counted as acceptance.

## Sub-groups

Sub-groups report back to the NORFORB meetings, and may occasionally communicate brief information about any activities, key learning points or other important information to the rest of the network between meetings by email.

The operational or thematic focus of individual NORFORB sub-groups is decided during the annual meeting through the use of participatory exercises. The sub-groups are free to set up their own communication procedures and ambition levels based on the interest and capacities of their participants. The communication should be traceable, transparent and ensure easy handover and access to documentation to new members.

Based on their focus areas, the sub-groups are also free to determine whether they characterise themselves as working groups, thematic learning groups, reference groups or any other suitable title. In this way room is made for flexible cooperation at the same time as member organisations can regulate their engagement in NORFORB in line with their staffing and financial capacity, organizational priorities as well as individual participants' areas of expertise.

## Documentation

All relevant documentation related to the network shall be easily accessible to all its members through a joint online documentation platform, decided by the network depending on what options are available.

Documentation of the network's common activities will be archived by the lead organisation of the annual host country in the joint documentation platform at that point and will as such rotate between member organisations.

Common documents to be archived will include:

- Terms of Reference
- Agenda and minutes of network meetings together with the following appendices:
  - Updated list of member organisations and observers.
  - List/brief description of activities carried out by members in the name of the network, including key outcomes.
  - List/brief description of the activities/decisions of sub-groups during the previous period.
- Email conversations that include significant decisions affecting the network, sub-groups and joint work. The organisation that initiates such correspondence will send emails that contain significant decisions to the lead organization of the annual host country, with the heading 'NORFORB archive'.

## Application of funding and consortiums within the network

Network members may at any time form consortiums and apply for funding in the name of NORFORB (for example, a consortium was established in 2018 to run the FORB Learning Platform project, with funding from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs). When applying for funding, the following criteria must be fulfilled:

- Two or more NORFORB members from more than one country shall be involved.
- The aim of a consortium shall be in line with the aim and objectives of the NORFORB network.
- Activities shall relate to one or more of the four operational areas of the NORFORB network.
- Activities shall relate to previous work done within the NORFORB network and/or one or more of its sub-groups.
- The rest of the network will be informed by email, enabling other NORFORB members to raise their concerns, objections and/or interest within two weeks.

If all criteria are fulfilled, and if there are no unsettled objections from the other members, a consortium may be formed and NORFORBs name may be used in the application.

## Communication and branding

### Internal communication

Internal communication (except for communication related to network meetings and sub-groups) is a shared responsibility. Forms for this emerge based on interest and technological possibilities and are to be decided at the network meetings, e.g., listing who is interested in what themes/areas of information or finding alternative methods/channels for information sharing within the network. When applicable, new methods/channels must be chosen with the safety of partner organisations and/or participants from sensitive contexts taken into account.

The lead organisation of the host country is responsible for the members list including updated contact information.

### External communication

All NORFORB members are invited to highlight the work of the network and their membership in it. Individual members that highlight the joint work of NORFORB (for example the FORB Learning Platform) must regard and brand the joint work as NORFORB activities, using the NORFORB and the FORB Learning Platform logos and names.

For other events and/or materials to be branded as NORFORB activities, the following criteria must be fulfilled:

- Two or more NORFORB members from more than one country shall be actively involved.
- Activities shall relate to one or more of the core operational areas that NORFORB works with: advocacy, capacity building, knowledge & experience exchange, networking.
- If a new consortium wishes to use a brand established by an existing consortium (ex., the FORB Learning Platform), the new consortium will initiate a dialogue with the consortium that developed the brand, to ensure feasible synergies.
- The rest of the network will be informed by email in advance, enabling them to raise any concerns or objections to the use of the NORFORB name/logo within two weeks. In the event of unresolved objections, the logo shall not be used.

If all criteria are fulfilled, the NORFORB name and logos (including the FORB Learning Platform logo) may be used. The members involved will provide written and/or verbal information and updates about outcomes in connection with Network meetings. Members may NOT use the NORFORB or FORB Learning Platform brands to publish or otherwise present specific policy positions/proposals regarding specific country situations/groups without prior consent of the other NORFORB members. For such activities, members must use their own organisational brands.

### Change of Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference are to be reviewed on a regular basis. The process is initiated by the lead organisation of the hosting country every five years. Changes are discussed at the spring meeting. If the network agrees that there is a need for an update, the Terms of Reference are revised and voted on during the following meeting. A drafting committee may be assigned the task to revise the Terms of Reference. A draft is to be shared with the network one month ahead of the autumn meeting. Minor changes may be agreed on in the spring meeting in which they are discussed.

A majority of the attending organisations of the autumn meeting has to be in favour of the new Terms of Reference in order for it to be valid. Those unable to attend, may express their opinion on the draft during the four weeks period before the meeting. The revised Terms of Reference must be signed by all members.

Decided at the NORFORB Network meeting, April 2025.