

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT FOR SEAFORB NETWORK **NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT**



**STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT FOR SEAFORB
NETWORK: NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT**

2023

Asia Centre

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AICHR	ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FoRB	Freedom of Religion or Belief
GONGO	Government-operated Non-governmental Organisation
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
(I)NGO	(International) Non-governmental Organisation
IP	Indigenous People
KII	Key Informant Interview
LRG	Local Reference Group
NAR	Needs Assessment Report
SC	(SEAFORB Network) Steering Committee
UN	United Nations
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Southeast Asia is threatened by a series of violations on religious rights targeting ethno-religious minority groups and those that do not adhere to religiously-oriented laws and regulations. The absence of a dedicated platform to advocate for the religious rights of the people in the region stood as a critical action point that needed to be taken forward.

Against this backdrop, in 2015, three civil society organisations (CSOs)¹ operating in the region joined the office of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to initiate a long-haul effort to establish the SEAFORB Network, given the need for action on the ground to address FoRB-related issues in Southeast Asia. They came together as the SEAFORB Steering Committee to organise annual conferences to promote and advance religious freedom in the region. In the past eight years, the conferences have served as a platform for advocates to promote equality and liberty for individuals of all religions or beliefs in the region.

After eight years, the Asia Centre – also a member of the SEAFORB Steering Committee in Bangkok, Thailand – was tasked with undertaking a needs assessment to develop the Network’s Strategic Plan for 2024–26. This would consolidate the work of the Steering Committee and coordination of individuals and organisations that make up the SEAFORB Network.

Strategic Development for SEAFORB Network: Needs Assessment Report outlines key Freedom of Religion or Belief issues identified by FoRB advocates in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. The data obtained for the needs assessment report will inform Strategic Plan for the SEAFORB Network.

The report adopts a framework to assess four areas: 1) key problems shaping religious freedom, current intervention areas and proposed intervention points by the SEAFORB Network; 2) roles of key sectors working to promote and protect FoRB as well as strengths and weaknesses of current partnership and networking models in Southeast Asia; 3) expectations for the SEAFORB Network and the SEAFORB Steering Committee who leads such a grouping; and 4) risks to the development of the Network.

Using the above framework, firstly, the report provides a summary of the online quantitative survey. Secondly, the report provides a country-based analysis of Key Informant Interviews (KIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Thirdly, the report provides a thematic analysis of the findings of KIs and FGDs based on the four key research areas. Fourthly, the result of the research is adapted into a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis.

Data shows that the Network should be strengthened based on three core principles. First, the Network should serve as a FoRB-specific platform. This ensures that the Network addresses religious issues through a rights approach and enables the integration of FoRB concerns with other essential human rights, promoting a comprehensive and inclusive approach to human rights advocacy. Such a network complements existing efforts in the region which focus on interfaith dialogue, harmony and religious extremism. Second, the Network should be civil society-led and Southeast Asia-owned, for the purpose of having decisions and actions by the SEAFORB Network be in line with the needs of those in the region. Respondents working in the region also see this as being beneficial in engaging with regional governments and intergovernmental institutions. Third, the Network should bring together stakeholders from different sectors – national and international civil society organisations, faith-based organisations, development aid agencies, intergovernmental organisations and academics, among others – as well as religious minority communities to incorporate multiple views on FoRB issues in the region.

In terms of operationalising the Network, data reveals a relative indifference regarding the formal or informal nature of the Network. Nevertheless, local FoRB actors in Southeast Asia would like the SEAFORB Network to be supported by a strong administrative mechanism, which need not necessarily be registered as a separate entity.

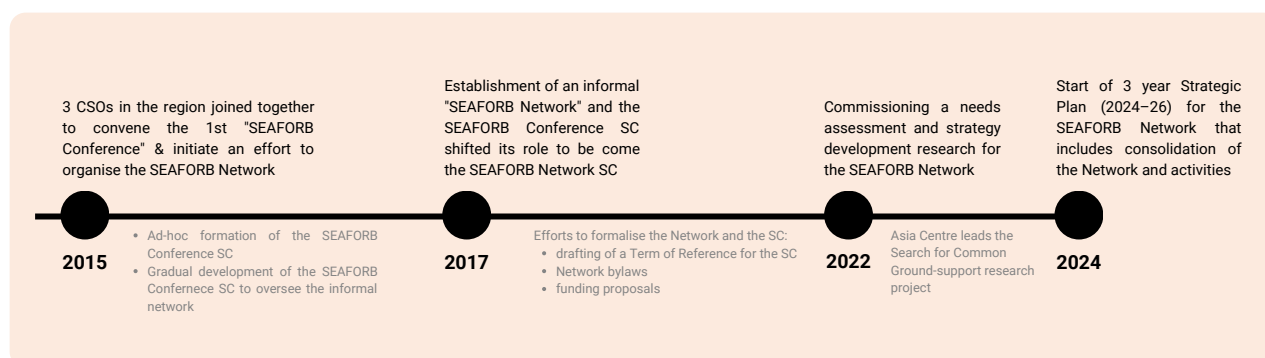
Efforts to build the SEAFORB Network present some challenges. Data shows that issues related to religion remain highly sensitive across the region, resulting in a fear by FoRB stakeholders of being physically attacked by government officials and extremist groups. Concerns are also related to the perception of the Network being a form of Western interference. Furthermore, local civil society organisations expressed concerns regarding opportunities for funding and resources through the Network.

Overall, the data shows that having a consolidated network is a vital step towards identifying innovative and collaborative strategies to address FoRB violations in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, to concretise its roles and address concerns raised by FoRB stakeholders, the Strategic Plan for the SEAFORB Network must properly address key points raised through this research effort.

¹ Boat People SOS (BPSOS), Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), and International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)

1. Introduction

Annual SEAFORB Conferences since 2015 were positioned as a forum to bring people together to exchange views and ideas to promote and protect religious freedom. The organisers of the SEAFORB annual Conferences were informally referred to as the SEAFORB Conference Steering Committee. In 2017, the SC decided to consolidate a SEAFORB Network Steering Committee (SC)² overseeing an informal network of attendees, participants and others connected to the SEAFORB Conferences, calling it the “SEAFORB Network”.³ After 8 years and several rounds of discussions among the Steering Committee members,⁴ in October 2022 in an initial effort to formalise its works, the SC, with the support of Search for Common Ground, commissioned a Needs Assessment Report (NAR) as part of the project “Strategy Development for the Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief (SEAFORB) Network”.



Asia Centre, a member of the Steering Committee, was appointed as the project implementer and holder. The Centre liaised with both the SC and Search for Common Ground during the course of the project. The findings of the NAR – which will elaborate on the FoRB situation in the region, the works of different actors, and expectations on the SEAFORB Network and will include a risk assessment – will inform the development of a three-year Strategic Plan to realise a course of action for the SEAFORB SC.

1a. Background

An Inception Report, completed between 14 September and 13 October 2022, informs the implementation of this needs assessment. Key outlines of the Report were publicly presented on 8 November 2022 from 9 AM to 10 AM by Asia Centre’s Regional Director, Dr James Gomez, during the 8th SEAFORB Conference held from 7 to 9 November 2022 in Bali, Indonesia. The presentation was well received by conference attendees who agreed that a formal Strategic Plan for the SEAFORB Network would help to strategise their activities.

As part of the Conference, Asia Centre designed and implemented two activities to validate the research project’s approach in collaboration with the SC. The first activity was a country-focused discussion and four thematic breakout sessions. The country discussions took place from 12 PM to 1:30 PM on 8 November 2022 and provided an opportunity for participants from six countries (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia,

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² The SEAFORB Network Steering Committee (SEAFORB SC) is a group of people from different organisations that originally came together to organise and contribute financially to the annual SEAFORB Conferences and later to oversee the SEAFORB Network which could maintain more constant contact and cooperation of FoRB actors. The membership to the SC was ad-hoc and both the people and organisations changed over time. In 2022, the SC, made up of representatives from Asia Centre, Boat People SOS, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, International Center for Law and Religion Studies (Brigham Young University), Religious Freedom Institute and Stefanus Alliance International, submitted a proposal to Search for Common Ground to undertake a needs assessment and strategic development for a SEAFORB Network. Asia Centre was appointed the project lead because of its research expertise in FoRB and its administrative experience in managing such a project. The Centre worked with both Search and the SC throughout the implementation.

³ “SEAFORB Network” refers to the organisers, participants and speakers of the SEAFORB Conferences since 2015. Lists of these organisations and individuals were maintained by different organisations and are not consolidated.

⁴ The sentiment among the SEAFORB SC was that an ad-hoc means for managing the Network through the voluntary contribution of SC member organisations is not sustainable. The process to establish a more formal mechanism – whether for the Network itself and/or for the SEAFORB SC – must be initiated based on what is required by the FoRB community in Southeast Asia.

Myanmar, Philippines and Vietnam) to share their concerns regarding the FoRB situation in their countries, as well as submit short written notes of their deliberation.

Concerns from Cambodian participants related to the administrative burden encountered in registering a place of worship and the limits put on monks' freedom of expression. Christians and indigenous peoples (IPs) were noted as being under surveillance. For Indonesians, intolerance against religious minorities was a key issue in the country. The absence of legal recognition for those who practise non-official beliefs was also raised. Malaysian participants pointed to a rise in online hate speech against religious minorities. This was partly explained as a result of Islam being understood as the religion of the country. Myanmar participants pointed to a need for a safe space to document ongoing FoRB infringements. Those from the Philippines noted hostilities between different faiths as well as security concerns from extremist groups. Those working on FoRB in Vietnam shared the status of religious repression: believers are forced to follow state-created religious organisations or are required to register their religious status before joining a religious group. Those not following the regulations are meted out harsh punishments or subjected to attacks.

The second activity took place on 9 November 2022 and consisted of breakout group discussions facilitated by Asia Centre from 9 AM to 12 PM. Conference participants were divided into 9 groups (for a total of 75 participants) to discuss one of these four topics: mapping of key concerns in the region, mapping of potential partners and discussion of the structure and risk assessment of a formalised SEAFORB Network.⁵

- Activity 1: Issue Analysis (2 groups of 8 people each): The two groups pointed to two key FoRB issues in the region: non-compliance of FoRB laws with international standards and a lack of awareness of FoRB issues across the region. These issues stem from societal prejudices against minority groups, as well as authoritarian and majoritarian management of religious affairs by ruling governments.
- Activity 2: Actor Mapping (2 groups of 7 people each): A point made by the first group was that the Network is already connected with key players in the region, but it nevertheless needs to ensure the participation of those advocating for minority rights, such as indigenous peoples, gender minorities, and youth. Participants stated that a mechanism must be established to create a dialogue with governments, although whether such a mechanism should be within or managed by the formalised SEAFORB Network was not a point of discussion. Similarly, the second group – consisting of Malaysians – pointed to the role of religious organisations and institutions that are working to promote religious tolerance in the country, as well as proposals to engage with parliamentarians and media houses to share FoRB data.
- Activity 3: SEAFORB Network Structure (3 groups: 7, 8 and 9 people): Participants from across the three groups agreed on the goal of the Network – to facilitate the coordination of stakeholders in the region for FoRB. There was, however, no consensus on the expected governance structure of the Network. Some stakeholders expect a more formalised Network that includes a clear membership and decision-making process, as well as a permanent Secretariat. Others believe that the Network would be more effective as a loose collective of actors that provides FoRB advocates with autonomy to take part in activities under the banner.
- Activity 4: Risk Assessment (2 groups of 9 and 12 people each): The first risk assessment was conducted among a diverse group of participants. Key risks included the fact that people who join SEAFORB Conferences could face prosecution under restrictive laws, lack of funding opportunities, and the scale of big countries like Indonesia, making it difficult for a national network to be developed. Another group – consisting solely of Vietnamese participants – painted a detailed picture of the situation of FoRB work in Vietnam. This includes concerns regarding personal safety and limitations in receiving foreign financial assistance.

A third activity on 10 November 2022, after the conference, was a two-part full-day meeting among SC members to 1) reflect on the presentation of the inception report and associated activities as well as 2) discuss the framing of the Strategic Plan. The inception report was well received and validated the research themes. However, the SC felt more time could be given to participants during the country and thematic discussions. In terms of strategic planning, they came up with broad outlines for the Asia Centre research team to follow after completing the needs assessment report.

The 8th SEAFORB Conference provided the opportunity to present the Inception Report to the broader community; launch the survey; gather indicative evidence from the country and thematic discussions to validate the Inception Report; allow the SC to reflect on the activities at the conference; and provide a preliminary framing of the strategic plan. Overall, the conference provided the opportunity to inform and engage the SEAFORB Network in the strategy development process.

1b. Methodology

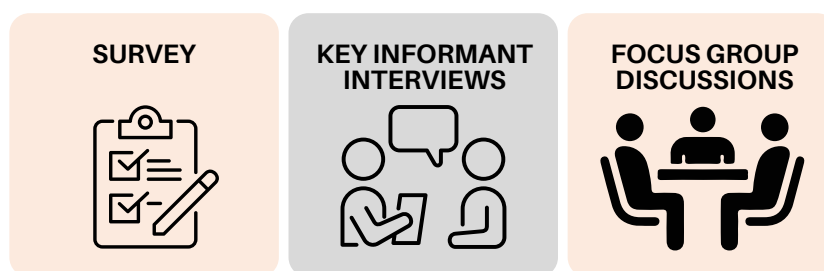
The research process to elaborate this needs assessment, which will inform the strategic plan, consists of four phases – Inception Report, community engagement (as mentioned above), primary data collection and analysis.

In the **first phase**, Asia Centre researchers drafted the Inception Report, to detail the research objectives and methodology, and identified the most relevant themes related to the state of FoRB work in Southeast Asia to create an assessment framework for the needs assessment. The framework (see Annex 1) was based on previous SEAFORB SC reports, minutes, and other planning documents, which collectively guided the research for this NAR. While the assessment framework was being developed, a set of survey questions were also developed in parallel and sent to the SC for their review and confirmation.

The **second phase** was the community engagement, undertaken during the SEAFORB Conference in Bali, Indonesia from 7 to 9 November 2022 as discussed in Section 1.1. It included a set of six country discussions and four thematic group discussions that validated the themes identified in the Inception Report.

The **third phase** of the research consisted of collecting primary data to inform the needs assessment. Three methods were used to generate and analyse data:

- First, an online survey. The survey of 29 questions (4 background and 25 thematic questions) was distributed via QR Code, email, and personal communication to respondents starting on 8 November 2022 at the 8th SEAFORB Conference. The survey was administered to respondents until 21 February 2023. During this period, 103 accessed and started the survey and 42 fully completed it.
- Second, KIIs. A total of 19 KIIs (beyond the 15 KIIs stated in the Inception Report) were conducted online between January 2023 and April 2023.⁶
- Third, FGDs. A total of 6 FGDs were conducted in the 6 target countries. A total of 42 (beyond the 40 stated in the Inception Report) participants attended the FGDs.⁷ A total of 3 FGDs were face-to-face (Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam), while 3 were conducted online (Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand). As mentioned in the Inception Report, a mixed online and on-site approach was used to manage the meeting and travel schedules of KII respondents, FGD participants and convening partners.⁸



Participants in the primary data collection process were to be drawn from the Local Reference Group (LRG) – representatives of civil society and faith-based organisations working on FoRB in Southeast Asia – as identified and provided by the SEAFORB SC. A total of 37 members were included in the initial list provided by the SC, to which another 8 were added by Asia Centre and acknowledged by the SC, bringing the total to 45. Asia Centre reached out to members of the local reference group for interviews and FGDs, however approximately half of them did not respond despite repeated requests. As a result, Asia Centre had to identify 20 new KII respondents and invest additional time to establish communications with them. In the end, only 9 KIIs were successfully completed from the LRG, while 10 KIIs were completed by Asia Centre’s additional respondents. For the FGD, selected focal persons from the LRG were contacted to assist in convening on-site FGDs. Similar to the experience with the KIIs, all except two focal persons from the LRG provided names for those who can take part in the FGDs. Therefore, Asia Centre identified 6 extra FGD facilitators (Indonesia (2), Philippines (4)) and once again had to additionally identify and invite participants separately to take part in the country FGDs.

The **fourth phase** of the needs assessment consisted of data analysis from the online survey, KIIs, and FGDs, and the drafting of the Needs Assessment Report. As a building block to the Report, the Centre presented the findings of the online survey to the SC on 22 December 2022. The 25 thematic questions for the survey were presented in a sequential manner, clustered along the framework adopted in the Inception Report for KIIs and FGDs. In this way, the analysis of data collected could be uniformly approached. Following the completion of the KIIs and FGDs, the Centre went on to directly draft the needs assessment using the framework outlined in the Inception Report, which emphasised a country-based analysis. However, for a regional-level analysis, thematic and SWOT analyses were also included.

Preliminary findings from the KIIs and FGDs were presented to the SC and representatives from Search for Common Ground on 3 May 2023. Following feedback during the presentation on the structure of the Report, a first draft was submitted to the SC and Search on 19 May 2023 for their response. It was also presented to the stakeholders at the 2nd SEAFORB Network Strategic Development Workshop, 15-16 June 2023 and at a FoRB Learning Event on 27 June 2023 convened by Search for Common Ground. Following the responses received, the draft was revised and submitted, again, to the SC and representatives from Search for Common Ground on 30 June 2023. The last round of review (by Search for Common Ground, SC and USAID) in July 2023 resulted in the final draft.

2. Online Survey Results

This section presents the results from the online survey that was conducted between November 2022 and February 2023, which 42 respondents fully completed. Results are grouped into four categories: issue mapping, actor mapping, SEAFORB Network, and risk assessment.

2a. Issue Mapping

Throughout the region, the main challenges related to FoRB are government favouritism for or against certain religions, as well as laws, regulations, and policies that create discriminatory restrictions on the religious expression of minority and non-state-sanctioned groups. There is also concern regarding extra-legal harassment, particularly in Vietnam. At the societal level, intercommunal and inter-religious hostilities, as well as religious violence by organised groups, are also significant concerns. This is especially evident in Indonesia and the Philippines. Please refer to the breakdown in the table below for more details.

Table 2 Perception on which FoRB Issues Are Major Causes for Concerns in six Southeast Asian Countries

Issues	Rank (Country Outlook) ⁹					
	Indonesia	Malaysia	Myanmar	Philippines	Thailand	Vietnam
Government favouritism	3.83	4.75	3.17	3	5	3.33
Limits on religious activities	3.5	4.25	4	1.67	3.5	4.56
Laws and policies restrict FoRB disproportionately	3.83	4.25	4.33	4	4.5	3.89
Extra-legal harassment	2.83	3.38	3.17	3.33	4.5	4.89
Intercommunal /inter-religious hostilities	3.5	3	3.83	3.67	2.5	2.44
Religious violence by organised groups	3.5	1.38	2.5	5.33	1.5	1.89

(Scores range from 1 (lowest) – 5 (highest cause for concern);
Red denotes the #1 cause for concern; Orange denotes the #2 cause for concern)

Table 2 Perception on which FoRB Issues Are Major Causes for Concerns in six Southeast Asian Countries

Issues	Rank (Regional Outlook) ¹⁰
Government favouritism	4.5
Limits on religious activities	3.93
Laws and policies restrict FoRB disproportionately	3.64
Extra-legal harassment	3.36
Intercommunal /inter-religious hostilities	3
Religious violence by organised groups	2.57

(Scores range from 1 (lowest) – 5 (highest cause for concern); Red denotes the #1 cause for concern; Orange denotes the #2 cause for concern)

Other concerning issues in the region include the constitutionality of religious inequality, the refusal of local governments to adhere to religious laws and regulations and impose local-level regulations or practices that infringes upon FoRB, the presence of Government-operated NGOs (GONGOs) and state-controlled religious organisations, the prevalence of hate speech, and the limited representation of religious minorities in parliament and the government.

Various interventions are required to address these issues. Media engagement, capacity-building, and raising public awareness are crucial areas of focus. Additionally, respondents propose grassroots-level projects and frontline initiatives in countries with repressive environments. Furthermore, establishing informal communication channels among FoRB advocates is recommended.

As a regional network on FoRB, therefore, respondents see that the SEAFORB SC, in its effort to lead the works of the SEAFORB Network, can concentrate efforts on advocacy with national duty bearers and international stakeholders; prioritise capacity-building programmes for civil society and government officials, as well as the development of educational curricula promoting religious tolerance and pluralism; and undertake evidence-based research on FoRB issues in the region.

2b. Actor Mapping

Respondents represented organisations working on advocacy for FoRB, capacity-building, and community empowerment. Different actors identify various ways in which their expertise can contribute to the Network's future activities. FoRB actors can contribute to the network through activities such as knowledge- and experience-sharing, capacity-building, research support, and advocacy with relevant stakeholders, which are types of activities mentioned by more than half of the respondents. However, there is an underrepresentation of organisations engaged in activities such as litigation, social service provision, and support for refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants.

Regarding their programme modality, FoRB actors, particularly those from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, see the potential benefits of cross-border or international cooperation in their work. However, respondents from Thailand and Vietnam perceive fewer benefits from such cooperation compared to others in the region.

Among these actors, concerns mainly revolve around the limited impact of current measures and the resulting limited success of their work. This can be attributed to factors such as limited access to information, inadequate resources for implementing activities, and a lack of clarity on how they can contribute to the broader FoRB effort in their respective contexts.

2c. SEAFORB Network

In this subsection, the survey findings regarding respondent sentiment toward a governance and management structure for the SEAFORB Network, its aims, roles and structure are presented. The survey only asked closed questions without the option to justify answers. On the other hand, KIIs and FGDs allowed informants to provide in-depth explanations to justify their answers, adding extra value to their views. This is important as data from KIIs and FGDs indicates that respondents generally showed indifference towards having a formal structure for the Network. See Section 4.3.

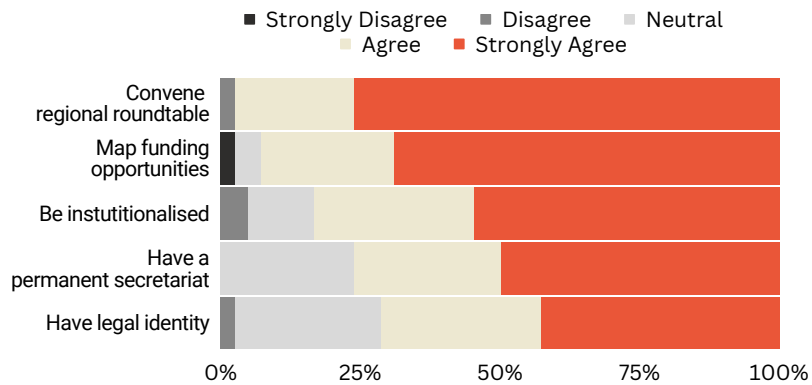
Respondents saw that the SEAFORB Network should have several key aims to effectively promote and protect FoRB in the region. Firstly, it should function as a coordinating mechanism, connecting FoRB actors and facilitating knowledge-sharing and collaboration among them. By fostering communication and cooperation, the network can enhance the collective efforts of FoRB advocates who are part of the wider SEAFORB Network.

Given its wide regional reach, respondents' view was that there should be country networks established and maintained as part of the SEAFORB Network which can operate at the national level and engage with other country networks. These country networks will play a crucial role in developing and implementing national FoRB agendas in alignment with the regional agenda. They will serve as platforms for strategic planning, coordination, and joint advocacy efforts.

Additionally, the SEAFORB Network SC should take the lead in consortium projects, leveraging funding opportunities to support SEAFORB partners in the region in implementing country-specific FoRB programs. By pooling resources and expertise, the network can enhance the impact of its activities and support local organisations in advancing FoRB.

The questionnaire also had a set of closed questions to assess how the Network could provide stability and continuity. The data from the questions shows that respondents would prefer the SEAFORB Network to be institutionalised. These were the answers provided to the question "To achieve this organisational aim [as specified in the earlier questions], the Network should...":

Table 3 Sentiment on What SEAFORB Network Should Do



The data drawn from a closed survey shows the respondents’ preference for a Secretariat responsible for the day-to-day operation of the SEAFORB SC. It should have a clear organisational structure and legal identity, enabling it to effectively carry out its mandate and engage with stakeholders at various levels. Furthermore, the Network should actively map available resources and funding opportunities for CSOs within the Network. This will enable CSOs to access the necessary support and funding to implement their ForB initiatives effectively. However, readers will see that, in the following chapters, the information from the KIIs and FGDs clearly shows that if given an opportunity to choose either a formal or a loose network, the preference is for the latter.

2d. Risk Assessment

A range of risks have been identified, which can be classified into three primary categories: physical security, the approach of the Network, and inclusivity.

Regarding physical security, there is a divergence of opinions among ForB advocates regarding the potential risks associated with their collaboration with other actors under the SEAFORB banner. Some individuals believe that their involvement may expose them to heightened risks, given the threats posed by both state and non-state actors. Notably, Malaysian actors perceive collaboration as particularly causing risks. ForB actors from Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand express reservations about the potential risks stemming from increased visibility to the public resulting from their association with the SEAFORB Network. They hold the view that being publicly linked to the Network may subject them to additional vulnerabilities.

Conversely, there are those who do not share the same concerns and perceive significant benefits in connecting with the Network. Partners from Malaysia and Vietnam consider visibility within the Network as vital to ensuring their security, underscoring the significance of their affiliation with SEAFORB. In the case of Malaysia, respondents saw a difference between the perception of collaborating with the SEAFORB Network and having visibility with key stakeholders who form the Network. The former, they see, causes risks and the latter, is helpful.

These divergent perspectives underscore the intricate nature of the risks faced by ForB advocates and the necessity for tailored approaches to address their unique circumstances. It is imperative for the SEAFORB SC, spearheading the SEAFORB Network, to acknowledge these concerns and develop strategies that strike a balance between the potential risks and benefits. By taking into account the varying security apprehensions and implementing measures to mitigate risks, they can cultivate an environment that fosters the safety and well-being of all its partners.

Table 4 Perception of Risk in Collaboration with the SEAFORB Network

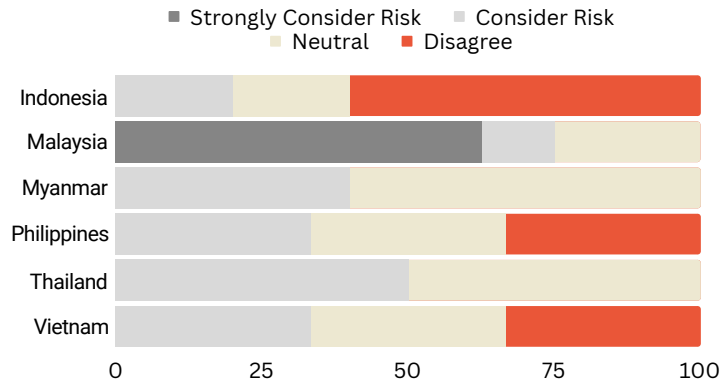
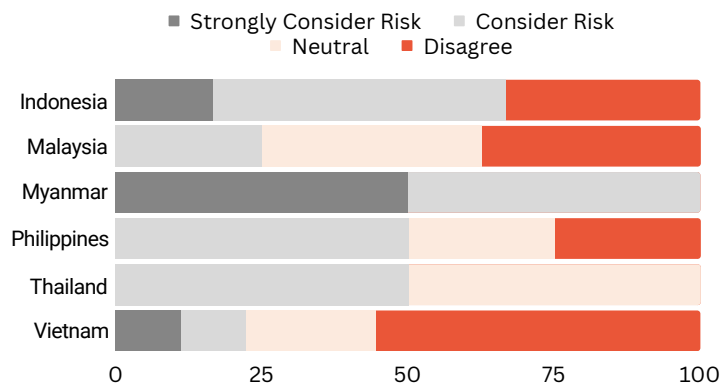


Table 5 Perception of Risk from Visibility as Working with the SEAFORB Network



Several risk mitigation strategies were identified by respondents to address these challenges. Firstly, public awareness campaigns are considered crucial in mitigating security risks. These campaigns serve to educate the public about the importance of FoRB and the work of the SEAFORB Network, thereby fostering understanding and support while countering potential hostility or misconceptions.

Additionally, protective mechanisms for participants of SEAFORB Conferences are deemed essential. These mechanisms may include measures such as providing secure venues, ensuring the confidentiality of participants’ identities, and establishing protocols to address any potential threats or harassment during conferences. For one, to safeguard data privacy and security, anonymisation of contributions and stringent data protection measures are recommended. This involves removing any identifying information from published materials or documents to protect the anonymity and safety of individuals involved in possible activities together with the SEAFORB Network. Furthermore, implementing robust cybersecurity measures and data encryption protocols can help mitigate the risks associated with the storage and transmission of sensitive information.

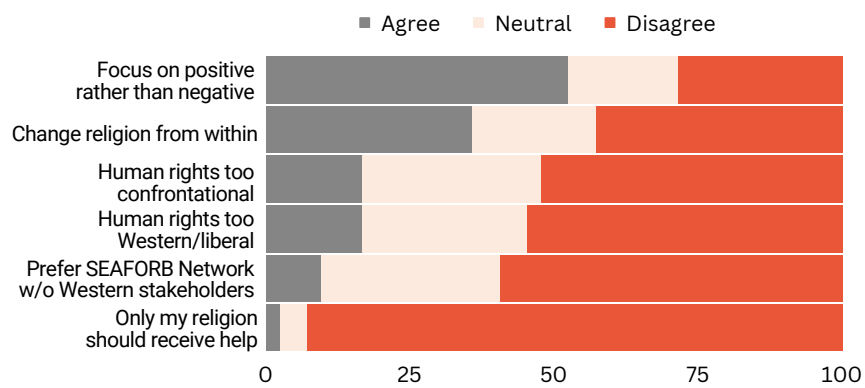
Another risk mitigation strategy is the provision of legal services. This involves offering legal support and assistance to FoRB advocates who may encounter legal challenges or face legal repercussions due to their activism. By ensuring access to legal representation, the Network can help protect its local FoRB actors and empower them to defend their rights effectively.

At a regional level, highlighting risks to policymakers is crucial. By drawing attention to the specific challenges faced by FoRB advocates, SEAFORB partners can advocate for policies and measures that promote and protect religious freedom and human rights.

Lastly, engaging in international advocacy as a collective is emphasised as an effective risk mitigation strategy. By joining forces with other regional and international organisations, the SEAFORB Network can amplify its voice and exert greater influence in advocating for FoRB and addressing the challenges faced by FoRB actors in the region.

Regarding the approach adopted by the SEAFORB Network, two primary concerns have been identified. The first pertains to how the Network approaches religion, including issues such as religious diversity, inclusion, and the recognition of different belief systems. The second concern revolves around how the Network approaches human rights and FoRB, particularly in terms of its principles, methodologies, and strategies for promoting and protecting these rights. These concerns reflect the importance of ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive approach that respects and upholds both religious diversity and human rights principles within the SEAFORB Network’s activities and initiatives.

Table 6 Sentiment on How FoRB Issues Should be Adopted

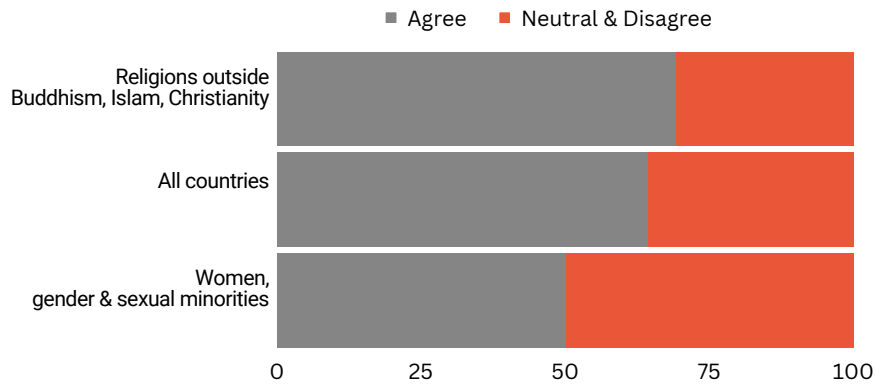


Firstly, there is a clear consensus that there must be a platform for religious actors and FoRB advocates to address the concerns of all religious communities offered as part of the SEAFORB Network, regardless of religious affiliations. It is also important that discussions and actions that encompass the needs of diverse religious groups be facilitated. Additionally, it was suggested that the focus should be on highlighting the positive contributions of religion rather than dwelling solely on negative situations. However, it is worth noting that opinions differ regarding whether SEAFORB-linked FoRB advocates’ roles should involve influencing change within religions.

Secondly, while there are concerns about potential backlash from adopting a human rights approach and involving Western partners in the Network, most FoRB actors express support for such an approach. They do not perceive the notion of FoRB as being confrontational, Western-oriented, or overly liberal, and they believe that the inclusion of Western partners is valuable for the SEAFORB Network. It is important to acknowledge that these sentiments represent a general perspective among FoRB actors, and individual opinions may vary.

When evaluating past activities, FoRB actors generally view “SEAFORB” as an inclusive platform. They recognise the effort to incorporate minority religions and address the concerns of every country in the region in previous SEAFORB Conferences. However, there is a shared sentiment that further efforts are needed to ensure even greater inclusivity and coverage. In terms of the inclusion of gender and sexual minorities, opinions are divided. Some perceive the connection with SEAFORB Network as adequately addressing their concerns, while others believe that more should be done to enhance their representation within the Network.

Table 7 Sentiment on the inclusivity of the SEAFORB Network
(as properly bringing concerns of specific groups to the fore)



Additional groups that require engagement include individuals from local communities, indigenous groups, youth, and atheists. To prevent the exclusion of these groups, several mitigation measures were recommended. These measures include conducting campaigns through social media platforms that specifically target youth, utilising local languages to effectively communicate with diverse communities, and shifting the focus towards promoting change from within religions rather than criticising religious practices, which would involve engaging more religious leaders.

Additionally, suggestions were made to implement a quota system for membership to ensure representation from various groups; develop a comprehensive strategy to expand the network in the short, medium, and long term; adopt a consultative approach to decision-making; and formulate country-specific strategies to address the unique challenges faced by different nations.

3. Country Analysis

Below, the country-based results from data analysis are presented. As explained in the methodology, KIIs and FGDs were conducted in each country included in this study. Each sub-heading includes the analysis of the KIIs and FGDs for each country. Information within each country is arranged around four core themes: issue mapping, actor mapping, SEAFORB Network, and risk assessment.

3a. Indonesia¹¹

Issue Mapping

Concerns regarding FoRB in Indonesia are described as happening at both societal and structural levels. Among other issues, respondents highlighted an increase in intolerance and discriminatory practices, which creates an environment conducive to violent extremism. In different areas, religious majority groups assert their dominance over minority groups, justifying it as respecting the values and beliefs of the community (KII2). This has led to attacks on places of worship and non-religious individuals (KII1). The role of the government exacerbates the conflict. Particularly, the limitation to only six official religions, with a seventh category for “minority faith choice,” excludes religious minorities and indigenous peoples from equal protection under the law (KII3; 16). The influence of grassroots Islamic organisations over authorities (KII3) has also resulted in unequal management of religion in the country, where the protection of minority religious and indigenous groups is lacking, and there is a bias towards enacting religiously-oriented moral decrees as enforceable laws (KII3; 16).

Key features of FoRB intervention in the country include the following: advocacy to prevent extremism (KII1; 2), advocacy for the rights of religious minorities by minority groups (FGDID4), anti-radicalism policies (moderasi beragama) by the government (FGDID4) and religious grassroots organisations (KII3) such as Nahdlatul Ulama. Ad-hoc coordination is also observed on issues such as blasphemy laws (KII2), the penal code revision (KII3), and the implementation of Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendations (KII2; FGDID2). In terms of capacity-building, different organisations – civil society as well as academic institutions – coordinate training for local CSOs on religious harmony (KII1; KII16), as well as capacity-building for youth on religious pluralism and FoRB (FGDID4). Another common intervention is legal aid services to religious minority groups, assisting them in asserting their right to belief and accessing public services (KII16).

Despite these efforts, respondents see that what is needed is advocacy for FoRB to be promoted at the national level and included in the political agenda (FGDID1), with a particular focus on recognising religious minority groups in the country. It is essential to present FoRB issues as human rights issues, emphasising the importance of protecting the rights of all individuals to freely practise their beliefs (KII2; FGDID2). There is also a need for religious tolerance education and projects to improve media information literacy at the societal level (KII1; FGDID1; FGDID3) to address the sharp increase in religious extremism in the country.

In this regard, a number of programmatic priorities have been identified for the SEAFORB SC to drive the activities of the SEAFORB Network. Firstly, it was suggested that the SEAFORB Conference be continued (FGDID1; FGDID3; KII2) as a platform for different stakeholders to come together and share lessons learned. Secondly, there is a need for research and evidence-gathering to support advocacy efforts by local stakeholders. This may include indexing rights violations across the region (KII2; KII3) or creating a mapping of actors that can be engaged both nationally and internationally (KII2; KII16).

Actor Mapping

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can be broadly divided into two groups based on their advocacy focus (KII2). The first group, comprising international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and some local NGOs (KII2), is dedicated to promoting and safeguarding FoRB in Indonesia through advocacy with international stakeholders, providing legal aid (KII16), conducting training sessions, and raising public awareness on FoRB issues.

However, according to respondents (FDGID1-2; 4; KII2), the efforts of NGO stakeholders have not been sufficient in addressing FoRB. A significant proportion of NGOs, religious grassroots organisations, and interfaith platforms focus on reducing intolerance (here denoted as the second group) (FGDID4; KII3). These efforts may include hosting interfaith dialogues, addressing non-religious social issues within the community (FGDID4), and delivering training sessions for religious leaders (KII1). The aim of these activities is to contribute to a long-term solution to countering negative attitudes in society (KII2). However, these efforts can often exclude non-official religious groups that are not recognised in the dialogue (FGDID1). As a result, intolerance towards these groups is rarely addressed. Religious communities are also sometimes criticised for reaching out to these groups solely for proselytising purposes (FGDID2).

The government and United Nations (UN) agencies have made some efforts to promote interreligious cooperation and implement anti-radicalism policies (FGDID4; KII23). It is worth noting that Indonesia also hosts regional parliamentary and government networks such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights which have coordination mechanisms concerning FoRB/religious issues (FGDID2). However, officials tend to adhere to a strict definition of religion and fail to recognise minority religious groups, thereby limiting their efforts to provide adequate protection for different faiths, including atheism, which is considered illegal. Consequently, FoRB is not prioritised by political actors, and many of them deny the occurrence of FoRB issues in the country (FGDID1-2).

Various partnerships exist within this field, following the aforementioned division. The Gus Dur Foundation and the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue are examples of organisations that maintain a network of locally-based groups across the country (KII1; 16) advocating for tolerance. However, there is concern that due to the sensitivity of the human rights issue, there are no robust FoRB networks (KII16; FGDID2). Issue-based coalitions have formed to advocate for topics such as the blasphemy law and violent extremism with national and international authorities (KII2). Ad-hoc coordination also takes place to engage with international organisations when the country enters the UPR cycle (FGDID2). In general, these networks lack technical and financial resources (KII1) to effectively coordinate projects with their members. There are also concerns that FoRB issues are not prioritised within the wider human rights network/coalition in the region (FGDID2).

SEAFORB Network

Indonesian respondents perceive the SEAFORB Network as an umbrella network organisation (KII2) that can coordinate strategy and advocacy among its partners and FoRB advocates in the region (KII1; 3-4). In this regard, the central entity of this network – the SC – should take the lead in developing a national-regional strategy and become a platform for civil society-led projects focused on FoRB (FGDID2). This approach would differentiate “SEAFORB” from other non-human rights actions and networks, and allow for intersection with other rights, such as those related to gender (FGDID1).

The first step, as noted by a respondent who had experience in developing a similar national-level effort, involves establishing core values, goals, membership, and partners, which will require a structured process (KII1). To expand its reach, the SEAFORB Network could affiliate with existing in-country and regional organisations and networks, as well as engage in fundraising and lead consortium projects (FGDID2).

To gain a better understanding of the situation on the ground, respondents emphasise the importance of involving local organisations in the decision-making process (KII2-3). This can also include partnerships in the parliament, the Ministry of Religious Affairs as well as other religious grassroots organisations in the country (KII3). Additionally, the Network should be promoted as an agenda led by Southeast Asian stakeholders (FGDID3), in part doing so by having the Network's Steering Committee inclusive of members from the region (KII3). Its regional status can be leveraged to establish connections with ASEAN or ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) mechanisms (FGDID2). However, it is crucial to ensure that this effort remains driven by civil society efforts.

Risk Assessment

Respondents did not indicate physical violence as a key risk. However, some noted the violence perpetrated by extremist groups, which could target religious minorities and those advocating for FoRB (FGDID). This is concerning, considering the country's growing intolerance (KII1; 2). There is also a concern that advocating for FoRB could be interpreted as promoting atheism, which is illegal in the country (KII1).

Two additional comments were made regarding the Network's approach. Firstly, there is a risk that a "SEAFORB organisation" may be perceived as a competitor for funding (KII2). In this regard, the status of the Network should be established as a coordinating entity rather than a competing organisation. Secondly, it should also include currently marginalised religious groups. In this regard, prioritising a human rights approach would enable intersectionality with marginalised religious, ethnic, and gender minorities.



3b. Malaysia¹²

Issue Mapping

The state's politicisation of Islam and establishment of laws that prioritise it over other faiths has imposed limitations on members of non-mainstream interpretations of Islam and other religions in expressing their beliefs. This situation has created tension and hostility towards minority groups, both socially and politically. The resulting intolerance and extremism contribute to a hostile environment that undermines the fundamental human right to FoRB. Therefore, it is crucial to address these issues in order to ensure the protection of all groups in society and promote a more tolerant and inclusive society.

Respondents perceive the current FoRB intervention in Malaysia as limited. Key measures include advocating for FoRB within the Muslim community through religious teachings (KII4), coordinating inter-religious mechanisms to foster harmony and occasionally advocating with government authorities, and undertaking advocacy and capacity-building initiatives under the framework of Preventing Violent Extremism. There were also mentions of research focusing on countering hate speech online and providing legal consultation to ex-Muslims and IPs affected by strict religious conversion and family laws (FGDML6).

The intervention points highlighted as most needed are systematic investments in tolerance education and promoting diversity by both government and non-government actors (FGDML3; 4) to address deep-rooted prejudices. The public still lacks an understanding of the underlying causes of FoRB violations and discrimination, and there is a need for information literacy training projects (FGDML1; 4; 6). Another suggestion is the establishment of a platform to facilitate discussions on the sensitive issue of religious tolerance and pluralism, or alternatively, the provision of training for those working on the issue to effectively approach the problem (KII4; 5). Capacity-building and understanding of mechanisms and instruments that align with international standards were also identified as necessary improvements for many NGOs (KII4).

Several programmatic priorities were identified for SEAFORB SC. Respondents propose that one task for the SC is to develop toolkits for engaging with different beliefs (KII4; 5; 17). Connections can also be established with other similar FoRB networks in other regions, such as the South Asia Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief (SAFFORB) or the Nordic Ecumenical Network on Freedom of Religion or Belief (NORFORB) (KII5) to coordinate advocacy efforts and share knowledge. However, they also emphasise the importance of localising FoRB advocacy within Southeast Asian contexts and ensuring Southeast Asian ownership of the Network to support advocacy (KII5; KII17), including engagement with regional organisations such as ASEAN.

Actor Mapping

There are a number of inter-religious organisations (such as the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST)) and religious organisations (e.g. Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) and Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) (KII5; FGDML1)) that promote a more tolerant interpretation of religions and operate to promote healthy relationships between members of different faiths (KII5). Comments also note their activities – albeit limited – to pass on the concerns of religious minority groups to authorities. Building interfaith relationships is also a practice at the community level throughout the country (KII5). There are also religious NGOs (Sisters in Islam (SIS) and Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF)) promoting the interconnection between Islamic teachings and religious freedom.

There are also a number of non-religious organisations operating. INGOs, including human rights organisations, have more technical and financial resources and so more capacity to do policy advocacy on FoRB. However, concerns were raised regarding their appreciation of local contexts (FGDML1; 2; 5). Legal aid organisations are established in Sarawak and across the country to address issues related to religiously-oriented laws (KII17). International organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme in Malaysia are also noted for working under the framework of preventing violent extremism rather than FoRB, in order to maintain cooperation with the government (FGDML2).

In terms of networking and partnership, there are in-country networks of NGOs and religious leaders working on specific issues such as interfaith dialogue and preventing extremism, and efforts are made to focus on hate speech and its interplay with existing ethnoreligious disinformation (FGDML2; 6). In general, the number of NGOs working on FoRB is limited and they tend to work within their sector, having a limited impact on the public's understanding of the issues (FGDML2). There are also competitions within the network due to separate funding applications (FGDML2).

There is little mention of international and regional partnerships, apart from UN agencies and INGOs providing funding. Many respondents felt the need for a network of Islamic maritime ASEAN countries to be established given the similarities in contexts.

Respondents also noted the lack of connection between human rights, legal-oriented NGOs, and the community (KII4). Furthermore, there was a concern that the notion of human rights could cause misunderstanding and negative reactions from the population (KII5; KII17) as 'human rights' is a sensitive issue in the country.

SEAFORB Network

KII respondents (KII4; 5; 17) did not express a strong feeling regarding any structures that should be adopted for the SEAFORB Network. This was also the case for FGD participants. Their focus was primarily on the Network's goals. According to their insights, the SEAFORB Network should primarily function for FoRB advocates to strategise advocacy and projects in collaboration with partner organisations within the respective countries. It should be dedicated to promoting religious freedom (FGDML2; KII17).

In this regard, there were some limited comments pertaining to the structure of such an entity. Particularly, some commented on the need for an organisational mechanism in place for the Network to be the main actor at the regional level to coordinate between different stakeholders. Nonetheless, it is important to ensure that organisations and other FoRB advocates within the Network are afforded a certain degree of autonomy to engage with others under the “SEAFORB” banner (FGDML5; 6) as it can be risky for different stakeholders to formally engage with the SEAFORB SC given their context of work.

Risk Assessment

In terms of physical safety, there have been cases of minority religious leaders being subjected to enforced disappearance by state authorities. It would be beneficial to have a report that sheds light on these practices, as it could help apply international pressure (KII5). There is concern regarding certain religious organisations or NGOs that advocate extremist religious views, such as those against the rights of gender and sexual minorities or religious pluralism, which engage in advocacy both at the national and international levels (FGDML2). These groups, along with other hard-line factions in Malaysia, exploit the notion of a perceived “siege” on Islam to suppress open discussions related to FoRB (KII4). The involvement of FoRB actors or Christian groups with international networks can sometimes be seen as a gateway for perceived Western interference (KII5; 17).



Risk Assessment

Myanmar faces significant challenges regarding FoRB due to long-standing policies of Burmanisation and Buddhisisation (FGDMM). These policies, which favour the Bamar-Buddhist majority, result in discrimination against minority ethnoreligious groups at the national level (KII6-7; 18). This discrimination is evident in citizenship laws that relegate ethnoreligious minorities to second-class status and exclude Rohingya individuals from Myanmar citizenship (KII18). Recent events, such as the military’s assault on the Rohingya population and the 2021 coup, have further exacerbated FoRB violations and restrictions on civic space for FoRB activists (FGDMM). In response to security threats, many academics and civil society officers have had to leave the country (FGDMM).

Local CSOs have undertaken initiatives to combat hate speech and disinformation and promote interfaith dialogue, albeit under the junta regime (KII6). Legal aid has also been provided to address citizenship laws, offer relief to refugees in Bangladesh, and ensure access to basic services (KII6; KII18). However, these efforts must be undertaken cautiously to navigate sensitivities related to FoRB. In the context of the Rohingya conflict, humanitarian projects supported by UN agencies aim to provide relief and services to refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) (KII6). Advocacy efforts within resistance forces are also being made to prioritise FoRB and establish a federal democracy post-coup (KII6; KII18).

Respondents highlight the need for inclusive participation of all ethnoreligious groups in Myanmar and recognition of the intersectionality of FoRB within the broader democratic and peace-building processes (KII7; 18). They emphasise the importance of projects focused on media literacy to combat disinformation and hate speech. Additionally, funding and support for humanitarian relief efforts for refugees and IDPs are essential (FGDMM). Advocacy efforts should also be directed towards revolutionary forces to protect FoRB (KII6). Respondents working with Rohingya refugees stress the importance of host governments providing access to education or vocational training for Rohingya children in refugee camps (KII18).

Several programmatic priorities were identified for the SEAFORB Network. Building trust among different religious groups to prevent inter- and intra-religious conflicts is a crucial step (KII6).

Establishing a cross-country working group to address shared concerns, similar to the Myanmar-Thailand group, is another potential priority (KII6). Conducting assessments involving experts and stakeholders from Myanmar is seen as valuable for fostering connections within the country's FoRB community (KII6). A programme can also be undertaken to raise awareness about the importance of FoRB among different ethnoreligious groups, revolutionary forces (KII6), and the wider population (KII6-7; 18). The lack of a FoRB curriculum in formal education is a concern (KII6; 7). Respondents also emphasise the role of a possible Secretariat/focal point as well as the SC in applying for funding opportunities as a consortium with other actors in the Network (KII6).

Actor Mapping

During the rule of the current junta, the work on FoRB in Myanmar has been restricted, compelling stakeholders in the country to operate discreetly. While there are some networks of actors working towards religious harmony, organisations are limited (KII6). Academic institutions, although allowed to function, face government monitoring and are forced to self-censor their views by focusing on less critical issues such as religious harmony (KII6).

International actors play a significant role in Myanmar, with Myanmar organisations based in other countries engaging in various projects and activities such as advocacy, online capacity building, and legal and humanitarian relief efforts targeted at governments hosting Rohingya refugees (KII7; 18). Additionally, international actors such as UN human rights mechanisms are urged to apply pressure on the ruling regime and continue funding local NGOs (KII6). Efforts are also being made to enhance the capacity of local NGOs, including developing action curricula (KII7) and providing consultations to smaller organisations (KII7). It should be noted that these activities are conducted informally and online.

Prior to the coup, there was a level of cooperation between local and international NGOs focused on religious freedom, albeit often limited in scope and resources. Many members join these cooperatives for specific advocacy efforts or to receive training, rather than for long-term engagement (KII18; KII7). Additionally, some networks meet to share inputs for the UPR (KII6-7). Networks have limited funding to sustain their work, and even when funding is available, connections are often project-based (KII6-7). Nevertheless, FoRB actors are still able to connect with each other at a regional level through SEAFORB and SAFFORB, where they can operate more freely and engage with international stakeholders (KII6-7).

SEAFORB Network

To ensure effectiveness, respondents from Myanmar recommend establishing a more formalised structure for the SEAFORB Network, which can coordinate and strategise with member organisations while providing support (KII18). This should include a focal point of communication and in-country networks to facilitate national and regional-level strategy development (KII6; KII7) as well as leading projects among its partners (KII7). Such a focal point can also connect with other regional actors such as the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights and AICHR (KII7). Another respondent proposed some examples of networks on FoRB in Myanmar as possible mechanisms that the Network can take up (KII17). These networks of organisations loosely coordinate efforts on Rohingya based on their values. Respective central entities (such as Secretariats or focal points) set a strategy of how advocacy can be done and which type of actor the advocacy could point towards.

Furthermore, addressing the issues in Myanmar requires inclusive participation of all groups, recognition of FoRB's intersectionality with broader democratic and peace-building processes, and public advocacy linking FoRB violations to the country's history of repression. As a result, a human rights approach will be key for the SEAFORB Network (KII7; FGDMM).

Risk Assessment

Due to the risks posed by collaboration and visibility with the SEAFORB Network in Myanmar, appropriate measures must be taken, such as maintaining a low profile for Myanmar partners engaging in the Network, given the military's adoption of violence and repression against those working on FoRB issues (KII6; KII19). Research must also be undertaken to map those working on FoRB in the country and to facilitate the coordination of FoRB actors (KII7). One respondent expressed concern that some actors are involved in FoRB mechanisms only on the surface level, with FoRB forming only a part of their programmatic aim (KII7).

In terms of inclusivity, there is a need for more intrafaith relationship-building work, given the diversity of ethnoreligious groups in the country (KII6). This should also be incorporated into the approach of the Network by including the intersectionality of religious rights and ethnic rights (KII19). Advocacy must also be directed towards the National Unity Government and revolutionary forces (KII6; KII19), which are composed of former National League for Democracy leadership and ethnic armed organisations.



3d. Philippines¹⁴

Issue Mapping

Respondents do not consider FoRB as a significant concern at the national level. However, they see the conflict in Mindanao as a pressing issue. This conflict has arisen due to the demand for autonomy by militant Muslim groups in the region, which has been a longstanding problem. The rise of Islamophobia as a result of counter-terrorism movements since 9/11 and ISIS has led to the implementation of more restrictive measures. Additionally, the securitised nature of regional administration has instilled fear among Muslims, making it challenging for them to freely practise their faith (KII8; 10). Furthermore, there is a growing concern about hate speech directed towards Muslim minorities (KII8).

NGOs, media, and religious actors working in the region and advocating for community development are subjected to monitoring by authorities through "red-tagging". The military also carries out searches on their premises, plants evidence, and requires these actors to report to military camps (FGDPH).

Current measures implemented in the country, as noted by participants, include the passing of laws related to religious freedom, aimed at preventing the enactment of local regulations with religious justifications and prohibiting religious-based discrimination (FGDPH). There are advocacy and agenda-building efforts among different stakeholders for the peace process in Mindanao (KII19-11), as well as humanitarian support for IDPs resulting from violence (KII9; 11). Efforts are also being made to promote community development in the region (FGDPH; KII10) and advocate against hate speech targeting indigenous peoples in the region (KII10). Respondents also mention advocacy and solidarity-building at the international and national levels with various networks (KII10-11).

Respondents identify several intervention points necessary for promoting FoRB and addressing the conflict in Mindanao. One respondent emphasised the importance of civil society advocacy to share best practices and challenges with other actors (KII9). Grassroots organisations have achieved success at the community level, but such success is not shared with other localities (KII9-10). Respondents also call for the need for an interfaith network of different faiths for dialogue (KII10-11). These intervention points suggest the importance of coordinated efforts among different actors to promote FoRB and address the conflict in Mindanao.

As for the SEAFORB Network and activities under such a banner, respondents see that a priority should be set on developing and sharing knowledge products such as best practices (KII11), engaging with

interreligious councils in the country (KII11), and collaborating with other human rights networks in the region to prioritise FoRB as one of their agenda items (KII10). The SC should also connect with grassroots organisations through capacity-building and funding (KII10). The SEAFORB Conferences are still important to facilitate the connection of country networks for knowledge-sharing and joint advocacy (KII11).

Actor Mapping

Participants from the FGD, including those from the religious sector, parliamentarians, and human rights NGOs, agree that there are no significant FoRB players at the national level. Similarly, there are no specific networks dedicated solely to FoRB. Instead, actors participate within the broader human rights network in the country.

Local CSOs and community leaders are focused on building community relationships in response to the violence (KII8-10; FGDPH). This bottom-up approach aims to manage hate between communities. NGOs that follow this approach regularly organise inter-religious dialogues (FGDPH; KII9). Some NGOs rely on dialogue for agenda-building and policymaking, which can then be used with relevant authorities to advocate for tangible outcomes (KII10). There are also high-level interfaith dialogues that bring national-level religious leaders together for discussions (FGDPH). Respondents note the positive role of local authorities in supporting these activities, and in some cases, civil society-led initiatives have been turned into official policies (KII10-11). Efforts are also being made to support IDPs during and after conflicts, particularly those affecting indigenous peoples in the region (KII8-10).

Human rights organisations such as NGOs, the human rights commission (FGDPH), and parliamentarians are making efforts to enshrine religious freedom into law and monitor violations of FoRB and repression of civic space. Respondents (FGDPH; KII9) highlighted the need for advocacy efforts to protect FoRB during the COVID-19 pandemic and to address concerns related to securitised anti-COVID-19 measures.

Respondents are members of various national and international networks focused on promoting religious understanding. One example is the Bishop-Ulama Council, which aims to facilitate interfaith relationships within the community and between the predominantly Muslim region and other parts of the country. Another network is the United Religion Initiative (KII8-9). However, these networks have limited capacity to coordinate values and advocacy strategies. While funding may be shared among different organisations, activities are conducted in the name of individual organisations rather than the network as a whole (KII10). Networks that operate through a human rights or FoRB approach are described as ad hoc and issue-based. Nevertheless, significant achievements, such as the religious freedom act, have been made through this form of networking (FGDPH).

SEAFORB Network

There was no particular opinion emerging among the respondents regarding their sentiment on how or whether the SEAFORB Network should be structured. One respondent noted that a structured approach to the Network would be beneficial for resource mobilisation and continuity of action (KII10), despite the bureaucratic challenges it may cause given the scope of FoRB work in the region and despite the fact that such a bureaucratic system may be seen as “dictating” FoRB activities in the region (KII9). Others did not provide concrete ideas as to how they think the Network should be managed. Regarding membership, respondents suggested that the Network should engage government actors but not include them in the decision-making process (KII10).

However, they agreed that a Network with a shared central vision (KII10; 11) would provide a strong foundation for coordinating activities. It is crucial for actors connected to SEAFORB to maintain the Network as being a regional-level network focusing on FoRB. Two KII respondents (KII9; 11) pointed out that these actors will choose to connect with the Network based not only on the resources it provides but

also on the Network's overall goal. Therefore, it is important to have a clear and defined objective for the Network. Similarly, the FGD reflected a sense that, despite differences in how FoRB actors and religious actors approach the issue of religious freedom, there is an avenue for coordination and such cooperation can be cultivated by the SEAFORB Network and activities as part of it (FGDPH).

Risk Assessment

Religious actors in the FGD have highlighted their concerns regarding the definition of FoRB in the Philippines. They are apprehensive about laws related to religious freedom and anti-discrimination, expressing worries that it may unintentionally prioritise certain rights, along with national security and public order, at the expense of religious rights. These actors recognise the importance of finding a delicate balance between FoRB and other interconnected freedoms and rights to ensure comprehensive protection for all individuals (FGDPH).

Furthermore, respondents have drawn attention to the issue of "red-tagging," a practice in the Philippines where the government labels FoRB actors as terrorists and a risk to national security. This alarming practice not only undermines the work of these individuals but also perpetuates a negative association between them and communism, thereby fuelling hate speech and further marginalisation within society. A risk, therefore, is that those collaborating with SEAFORB Network could be potentially red-tagged.

Should the SEAFORB Network be formalised and have a role as a regional actor, it is imperative for it to take the lead in addressing these concerns. Establishing a clear and inclusive definition of FoRB will help guide their efforts in striking the right balance between FoRB and other fundamental rights. By doing so, the SEAFORB Network can contribute to safeguarding religious freedom while ensuring the protection of other important rights and promoting a harmonious and inclusive society (FGDPH).



Issue Mapping

Respondents identified FoRB issues in the Southern Border Provinces, where an ongoing conflict exists between Malay Muslim forces and the Thai state. The two-decade-long conflict in the Deep South has created a clear division between Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims, making it difficult to establish interfaith dialogue, which is much needed (FGDTH1). Tension within the different population groups has increased in recent years, leading to rising Islamophobia and Buddhist extremism resulting from anti-Islamism (KII12).

Current measures undertaken are mainly through the peacebuilding approach. This includes advocacy around the common goals of the community and downplaying theological/political differences (KII12). There are also capacity-building efforts in the South such as actor mapping, community development and job creation (KII12). Some actors also engage in humanitarian support in conflict-affected areas (KII12). FGDTH1; 3 also notes multisectoral dialogue processes among state authorities, civil society, and separatist movements. While efforts are focused on the Thai south, a number of advocacy efforts are also taking place within the Buddhist community. Particularly, to reduce Buddhism's influence over government policies such as through education (FGDTH2; KII19). This would ensure that Buddhist values are not imposed on religious minority groups in the country.

To address these issues, respondents suggest a range of interventions, including community development to moderate the shift to radicalism (KII11, 12, 19). Interfaith dialogue is still necessary at every level, from grassroots to regional. Community-based dialogues can address specific issues such as the Azan

(FGDTH3); while national and regional dialogue can engage with state and religious leaders to find common ground. To further counteract extremism, linking International Humanitarian Law to religious edicts may be helpful in the Thai context, as noted by a respondent, but there is a risk of undermining religious beliefs (FGDTH1). Dialogue between religious groups is needed, with differences between separatists and non-separatists (FGDTH1).

In these efforts, there are avenues for FoRB actors, in their capacity as partners to the SEAFORB Network, to provide support to NGOs and frontline workers while having clear goals and values to address FoRB in the region. A possible Secretariat or focal point for the SEAFORB SC, with its potential reach, can act as a mediator at the regional level and engage in policy advocacy while issuing declarations against religious-based violence (FGDTH1). Facilitation of interfaith dialogue is crucial and such an entity could connect with individuals with strong on-the-ground processes to address community-level and structural issues (FGDTH4). It can also map “hotspots” of tension and ensure bottom-up, community-led programmes (KII11; 12; 19). Respondents from Thailand mentioned a need to conduct research on multiculturalism models that have successfully been used to manage religious conflicts (FGDTH2; 4). It could also be well placed to monitor government projects and engage positively in SEA’s digital space (KII11). At the regional level, connections on FoRB and other related issues can also be made with AICHR through its work on transnational crime and trafficking in persons (KII11).

Actor Mapping

The primary actors identified by respondents who work on FoRB in the country are NGOs and religious leaders, with a focus on the Deep South. These actors can be divided into two main groups: those who adopt a human rights approach and those who aim to build people-to-people relationships (KII12). However, the majority of actors can be categorised as adopting the latter approach.

At the national level, key players in this area include the parliamentary committee on religious affairs (FGDTH4), the Interreligious Council of Thailand, and academic institutions such as the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies at Mahidol University (IHRP) (FGDTH1; KII19). INGOs (FGDTH3) were also mentioned as serving as a third party to facilitate research and dialogue between government authorities and leaders of the separatist movement.

Regarding networks, one respondent noted the presence of local-level interreligious networks, although these are not well developed, and there are no existing networks at the national level (KII12). Additionally, there is a regional Buddhist network that implements research and advocacy projects against Buddhist extremism, particularly in addressing hate speech online (KII19).

Some actors within the Thai government have shown their support as well. For example, the Ministry of Culture continues to facilitate interfaith dialogues (FGDTH1), and Buddhist agencies have projects on religious tolerance in the region (KII12). However, the government has faced resistance from Buddhist communities (FGDTH1). The lack of sophistication among government authorities and community leaders has hindered their ability to mediate religious conflicts, and there are no proactive bottom-up measures from them (FGDTH3).

SEAFORB Network

The SEAFORB Network’s effectiveness can be enhanced by being organised around clear issues and concerns (KII11). To achieve this, it is important to establish a core goal and set of values (KII19) that allow diverse actors, including NGOs, government entities, and regional stakeholders, to implement their projects and activities under the umbrella of the SEAFORB Network. One of the key objectives should be to serve as a trust-building mechanism among different actors involved in FoRB, fostering collaboration and cooperation (KII12).

In terms of regional coordination, the SEAFORB Network can be positioned as a “network of national networks,” enabling the SC or a possible Secretariat to address regional concerns and engage with entities such as ASEAN and government authorities in various countries (FGDTH). Or, multiple issue-based focal points can be established by the Network to address different intervention points, including advocacy, refugee support, and research (KII12). Regarding the approach of a formalised Network, it must be ensured that such a mechanism maintains a bottom-up, civil society-led structure. It should be led by individuals or organisations from the region (KII19).

Regarding membership, SEAFORB Network partners should primarily consist of CSOs. It is important to emphasise that the SEAFORB Network is non-governmental, and the involvement of government officials can be considered on a case-by-case basis (FGDTH1; KII19).

Risk Assessment

Given the ongoing conflict, there are concerns about the physical security risks faced by religious actors participating in interfaith dialogues. They may be viewed by separatist movements as supportive of the Thai regime (KII12). Additionally, there is a fear of retaliatory attacks against civilians in the Southern region (FGD1-3). Therefore, it is crucial to establish mechanisms for engaging in dialogue with the separatists (FGD3). The SEAFORB Network and other FoRB actors can play a vital role as neutral parties in facilitating such dialogues.

It is important to note that there are government-funded information operations targeting individuals promoting religious harmony, portraying them as supportive of the separatist movement. This has led to harassment and attacks by extremist Buddhist groups against FoRB actors in the country (KII12). Some respondents believe that a coalition should only be formed when there is a specific issue to be addressed. Establishing a network of FoRB actors, especially if it emphasises civic rights, may create tension with government authorities (KII11).



Issue Mapping

The Vietnamese government is actively suppressing religious minorities and advocates who work to protect their rights (KII13-15). Ethno-religious minorities face harassment and surveillance, including unwarranted searches and raids, which has resulted in many being forced to flee the country (FGDVN). Specifically, Montagnards and Catholics are targeted due to perceived connections with Western countries (FGDVN).

The government’s tight control over religious organisations and NGOs has led to a shrinking civic space (FGDVN; KII14-15). Authorities exercise control over religious groups and closely monitor their activities. A coordinator working on FoRB in Vietnam (KII15) highlighted the importance of operating discreetly and informally to avoid arousing government suspicion. Consequently, there is limited diversity among stakeholders involved in promoting FoRB in Vietnam, as there are no independent local NGOs. Instead, there are GONGOs that project a positive image of Vietnam on the international stage (FGDVN; KII14).

Current efforts in Vietnam include providing humanitarian and refugee assistance (FGDVN; KII15) to those persecuted who flee the country. Engagement with diplomatic missions, particularly those of the United States, United Kingdom and Germany (FGDVN; KII14-15), as well as UN agencies, aims to document human rights violations, aid in the asylum process (FGDVN; KII13-15), and exert international pressure on the Vietnamese government on behalf of the affected individuals. There is also a reporting mechanism in place

to gather concerns from affected communities and share them with relevant stakeholders (KII13). Senior religious leaders receive training to create safe spaces for gatherings and to enhance their understanding of the situation. Programmatic training and online capacity-building initiatives are also provided for affected communities and their leaders (KII14).

Respondents, particularly from FGDVN, emphasised the importance of support from FoRB stakeholders in other countries. This support could involve capacity-building training to report incidents within their communities, identifying avenues for sharing concerns, engaging in social media advocacy targeting both domestic and international audiences, and providing funding to smaller organisations and communities within Vietnam. Additionally, a holistic approach is needed to address the needs of refugees, including mechanisms to provide legal and financial aid and guide them towards resettlement countries. It is also suggested to draft and promote a post-conference report that summarises the proceedings and outcomes of the conference.

Several programmatic priorities were identified for the SEAFORB Network. Continuing the conference as a platform for persecuted individuals to share experiences, build capacity, and engage in religious worship is essential. The network should provide funding for projects conducted by its members, particularly smaller community-based organisations. As a central body in the region, SEAFORB can compile reports and pass them on to relevant sectors. Additionally, an aim could be for the SEAFORB Network to have sufficient influence to morally condemn regional governments that violate FoRB.

Actor Mapping

To address FoRB issues in Vietnam, the programme modality involves connecting international stakeholders directly with community leaders. This includes diaspora communities that establish NGOs in the United States or Thailand, as well as religious and human rights INGOs (KII13–14; FGDVN). Given the limited civic space domestically, international networks and partnerships play a crucial role in advocating for and carrying out FoRB activities in the country.

Projects and activities are conducted through this network, which includes advocating for the rights of affected communities and religious leaders regarding FoRB, raising concerns with UN mandate holders such as Special Rapporteurs and through mechanisms such as the UPR, and providing training to document violations. Independent coordinators facilitate connections between foreign consulates, embassies, UN mandate holders, and the communities. Working groups are established to coordinate efforts between affected communities and international organizations. For instance, the International Religious Freedom Roundtable brings together FoRB actors from around the world, including some from the region. Similarly, each affected community has a “core group” that coordinates with external organizations. However, it was noted that regional actors such as parliamentarian networks have made little effort to address FoRB in Vietnam (KII14).

SEAFORB Network

Vietnamese respondents perceive the SEAFORB Network as a platform that facilitates collaboration among various stakeholders at the regional level. They believe that the network can build upon the advocacy and capacity-building efforts of INGOs. Members of the network could provide support and establish mechanisms to ensure that efforts are carried out by those within the region (KII13). Respondents suggested that if the SEAFORB Network and particularly the SEAFORB SC were led by Southeast Asian countries, it would have a stronger position and a greater impact on the Vietnamese government. This is because the network would be perceived as more locally rooted (KII14).

To achieve this goal, respondents (FGDVN; KII14) prefer the SEAFORB Network to function as a network rather than an “organisation.” They believe it is crucial for the SEAFORB SC to maintain itself as a coordinating mechanism for its members within the country and the region. Nonetheless, respondents recognise the need for a Secretariat (FGDVN; KII14) that can serve as the main contact point for both national networks (FGDVN) and external stakeholders.

Risk Assessment

One critical concern highlighted by Vietnamese respondents is the risk posed by government surveillance of SEAFORB Conference participants. This is particularly troubling given the documented cases of enforced disappearance and persecution targeting activists advocating for FoRB in Vietnam (FGDVN; KII2). Despite this risk, respondents believe that SEAFORB should strive to provide opportunities for dialogue with government officials (FGDVN).

Moreover, in terms of strategic approach, respondents emphasise that having the leadership of the network situated within SEA would enhance the Network’s position and amplify its impact on the Vietnamese government. This is because the Network would be perceived as a more locally grounded entity, potentially increasing its influence and effectiveness (FGDVN). However, respondents also recognise the critical role that international stakeholders play in the SEAFORB Network and the broader efforts to promote FoRB in the region.

4. Thematic Analysis

This chapter presents a thematic analysis of the key issues affecting the landscape of religious freedom in Southeast Asia. Data from all six countries are combined to identify the main topics that reflect the state of FoRB in Southeast Asia and inform the future course of action for the SEAFORB Network – and particularly the SC leading it. This section presents four themes: issue mapping, actor mapping, SEAFORB Network, and risk assessment.

Thematic Areas

Issue Mapping



Perception of FoRB

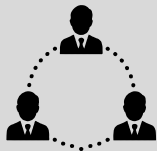


FoRB Concerns



Current/Needed Intervention Points

Actor Mapping



Actors & Roles



Partnership



Partnership Gaps

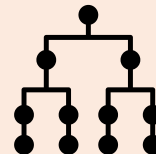


Resources & Sustainability

SEAFORB Network

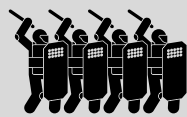


Aim



Structure & Membership

Risk Assessment



Physical Security



Approach



Inclusivity



Perception of Western Interference

4a. Issue Mapping

FoRB Perception

Respondents perceive FoRB as encompassing the freedom to believe, practise, and promote one's faith of choice. They acknowledge the responsibility to respect other faiths and their practices and encourage religious actors to seek common ground, even if not on theological matters but at least on social aspects. As a fundamental human right, FoRB should harmonise with other freedoms and rights, and should not infringe upon them unjustifiably. Promoting FoRB should extend beyond fostering religious harmony and tolerance; it should also address legal and non-legal barriers that restrict religious expression and societal attitudes towards the inclusion of religious minorities. This perception shapes how actors engage with the issue and envision the approach that the Network should adopt.

FoRB Concerns

Religion-based tensions, violence, and persecution are significant issues across the six countries. These problems are attributed to historical roots and the government's management of religious affairs, as well as societal non-acceptance of non-mainstream religions or religious sects. Forced assimilation and cultural imposition policies (Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam), along with the promotion of political Islam (Malaysia and, to a lesser extent, Indonesia at local levels) and Buddhism (Myanmar and, to a lesser extent, Thailand), to align religious ideals with the nation, marginalise religious minorities throughout the region. In the case of Vietnam, the government prioritises national security and socialist ideals over religious freedom.

Furthermore, at the structural levels, laws on religion enshrine restrictive and unequal management of religion. This can include enshrining the superiority of a particular religion in the Constitution (Malaysia, Myanmar), denying recognition of minority faiths and limiting the right to worship and practice faith (Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam), or barring access to basic social services (Indonesia, Vietnam). It can also include enacting religious decrees into enforceable laws and either imposing them throughout the nation or targeting the criminalisation of those deviating from the mainstream religious interpretation.

Ongoing conflict by armed religious minority groups seeking autonomy is prevalent, particularly in Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand. Local and national government agencies accommodate rising extremism in the region, endorsing violence against demands for autonomy. They tacitly endorse and facilitate religiously-based disinformation, hate speech, communal violence, and the destruction of places of worship by hardliners.

These conflicts also provide a rationale for securitised responses in the conflict areas, including military rule, harassment, or arbitrary killing. Some governments also conduct or tacitly condone forced religious conversion of indigenous peoples and enforced disappearances. Authorities may hinder peace dialogues or involve themselves in a way that exacerbates the uneven negotiation between majority and minority groups, particularly in Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand.

It is also worth noting that actions are taken against FoRB advocates across all six countries, both by state apparatus – whether legal or extra-legal – and non-state actors. This diminishes civic space and silences calls from affected communities. This will be further elaborated in Theme 4: Risk Assessment.

Current Measures Addressing Concerns

Advocacy for increased protection of religious freedom is carried out by FoRB actors at the national and international levels. Nationally, advocacy is focused on government officials regarding policy and legal reforms, as well as engaging with religious leaders on interfaith dialogue. Notably, FoRB actors in Myanmar are making significant efforts to advocate with the NUG and revolutionary forces' leadership to prioritise

FoRB as a key issue following the coup. Public awareness campaigns are also conducted to enhance understanding of the historical roots and legal framework that perpetuate rights inequality. Additionally, representatives from religious minority groups establish offices and participate in speaking engagements to share their experiences.

Internationally, advocacy involves engaging with governments in Asia, such as Bangladesh and Malaysia, which host Rohingya refugees. FoRB advocates also engage with Western countries through United States or British consulates in the region, as well as foreign agencies like the United States State Department or the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. Violations of human rights are reported to various United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) mandate holders or through the UPR mechanism, with data collected directly from affected communities. Such mechanisms exist in every country but are particularly relied upon in Vietnam and Myanmar, where national alternatives are limited. FoRB-specific mechanisms, such as IRF roundtables, also include participation from affected communities in the region.

However, there is a lack of advocacy at the regional level due to the absence of mechanisms to receive and address concerns. Regionalising FoRB advocacy is also challenging. In this regard, SEAFORB (and SAFFORB in the case of Myanmar) remains the primary mechanism for respondents to undertake regional-level advocacy.

Efforts are also made to **build the capacity** of those involved in promoting FoRB. This includes developing curricula on promoting FoRB and engaging with diverse beliefs, as well as providing training for FoRB actors in communities to report violations and establish connections with relevant stakeholders. Programmatic training, particularly in Vietnam and Myanmar, focuses on building the capacity of CSOs to implement FoRB projects, including writing proposals and managing finances. While these initiatives are limited, they are particularly valuable for smaller organisations.

Capacity-building efforts also target the general public and affected communities. Training is provided to help affected communities understand their rights protected by national laws or international standards. Public training, especially for youth, focuses on navigating online hate speech and disinformation. Social media campaigns aim to enhance youths' capacity in content creation, and senior religious leaders are trained to foster dialogue and enhance their understanding of current contexts.

In conflict-affected areas like Myanmar, **humanitarian work** supports Rohingya Muslims and other ethnic minorities in fleeing violence. Similarly, organisations provide hosting and support to IDPs affected by the war in Mindanao. In Vietnam, efforts are made to provide refugee support to those escaping religious persecution, with an NGO coordinating refugee assistance based in Thailand. Support provided includes medical aid, food assistance, legal aid, and temporary housing before individuals are resettled or seek asylum in other countries.

FoRB advocates also offer **legal aid** to religious minorities affected by strict religious or religion-oriented laws that elevate majority religious groups above others. Key areas of concern include the citizenship law in Myanmar, blasphemy laws and bureaucratic obstacles related to access to public services in Indonesia, and conversion and family laws in Malaysia.

Various organisations also work on promoting **religious harmony** by fostering connections among religious and community leaders. This includes interreligious dialogues, joint celebrations, and invitations to religious sites. Such dialogue mechanisms exist in every country except Vietnam. Educational initiatives target youth to prevent the emergence of discriminatory viewpoints. Efforts are made to address hate speech and its intersection with ethno-religious disinformation, particularly in Myanmar and Malaysia, and to a lesser extent in the Philippines. Religious harmony is also a focus of current peacebuilding processes involving different groups associated with the National Unity Government-led movement. However,

respondents note that divisions among groups have intensified, making dialogues more challenging to establish. In countries where the state proactively manages the recognition of religions, it is difficult to initiate dialogues with non-official religions.

At the community level, FoRB advocates and like-minded religious actors promote discourse that emphasises **common goals** and downplays theological differences. This approach is observed in countries with tensions between different religions, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as in specific conflict-affected areas (e.g., the respective southern regions of the Philippines and Thailand). External actors also engage through these mechanisms, aiming to increase economic opportunities and serve as mediators between different groups to address social issues.

Despite these interventions to ensure religious freedom and the right to practise faith, respondents observed that the work of FoRB advocates has not effectively shaped government policies in this regard. Concerns include governments denying recognition or rights to certain religions and their followers (Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Vietnam), ongoing military-perpetrated violence (Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand), and an increase in societal intolerance towards minority groups, often with tacit government acknowledgement.

Intervention Points by FoRB Advocates

An initial step that must be taken is to develop a collaborative **strategy development process** involving various organisations and sectors. It is crucial to engage in discussions about annual and five-year plans. A comprehensive process necessitates inclusive participation in the democratisation process, which can facilitate joint programming among different actors. Furthermore, concerns have been raised regarding the nature of interventions. Given the resistance towards government officials and foreign entities, programmes should ensure a bottom-up, community-led approach led by individuals from the region.⁴⁴

Advocacy is of paramount importance. Advocacy towards government officials is necessary to drive policy changes. Sustained advocacy with UN human rights mechanisms or foreign governments can exert pressure on regional governments to alter their actions. Some respondents also highlighted the potential of governments advocating for FoRB with their counterparts from other countries. FoRB advocates can also engage with parliamentarians and utilise parliamentary mechanisms. Additionally, they could collaborate with political leaders to prioritise FoRB during elections.

In certain countries (Malaysia, Myanmar), FoRB is a sensitive issue that people are cautious about acknowledging or speaking out about. In other cases, FoRB is not considered a prominent concern within the human rights community (e.g., Philippines, Thailand). Due to a lack of public advocacy, respondents note a general lack of awareness about FoRB concerns among the population. Consequently, coordination is required to determine the approach and execution of advocacy and online campaigns.

Capacity-building is necessary and should be directed towards different groups. Firstly, CSOs need support in understanding the regional situation, receiving research outputs, and facilitating interfaith dialogues. Additionally, they should be trained to apply for funding and manage project grants. Secondly, religious actors and affected communities need to enhance their knowledge of FoRB and religious tolerance, as well as learn how to document violations and convey their concerns effectively. Thirdly, capacity-building efforts should extend to state authorities, educating them about measures aligned with international standards to effectively address these issues.

Another recurring theme from the interviews is the need to establish mechanisms **connecting communities** and religious leaders. While interfaith dialogues may be considered saturated, they remain crucial, and respondents observe a lack of such dialogues at every level, from the community to the regional level. This challenge is particularly evident due to extremist groups that sow discord among the

population. Nevertheless, facilitating such dialogue can serve as a platform for discussion and coordination, forming the basis for further interventions.

Humanitarian and legal aid remain necessary as violence continues to be perpetrated against minority groups, and governments continue to enact restrictive laws affecting them. Addressing these issues requires both financial and technical resources. Establishing a humanitarian/legal aid fund could help in this regard.

In the long term, systematic investments are needed from both government and non-government actors in promoting **tolerance education, diversity in the media, and prevention of disinformation and hate speech**. Furthermore, community development initiatives aimed at supporting marginalised groups are still required. While these interventions may extend beyond the purview of FoRB, they help mitigate the impact of systemic religious discrimination experienced by minorities.

Intervention Points by the SEAFORB Network

Respondents provided various recommendations on how the SEAFORB SC and the Secretariat/focal point can prioritise the SEAFORB Network's programmes. These recommendations can be categorised into four main areas.

The first area of focus relates to the expansion of the **Conference**. All respondents agreed on the need for a platform that brings together different groups of people. Such a platform was and will continue to be beneficial for a number of reasons. Firstly, it allows FoRB advocates to discuss issues and strategise advocacy at a regional level. Secondly, the Conference serves as a trust-building mechanism among those working on the issue, including different types of stakeholders both within and outside the region. Trust can be built for further cooperation among local organisations or with international partners. Trust-building also facilitates the establishment of dialogue platforms among different religious groups or between state and non-state actors.

The second area emphasises the importance of **research**. Respondents highlighted that the SC as well as a possible Secretariat looking over its works, given its international reach and overview of the regional situation, is well placed to conduct research. For instance, they could compile an index of rights violations across the region and present them in annual reports. This would help identify "hotspots" where tensions are occurring or might occur, raising awareness among various stakeholders. A more detailed mapping of needs and actors at the national level would also benefit SEAFORB advocates in understanding their capacities. Additionally, there were comments that best practices from local NGOs are not being shared as knowledge projects across different areas and countries.

The third area focuses on **advocacy** directed at government officials, the general public, and within the civil society sector. Firstly, as a collective effort, SEAFORB partners, together with the SC could raise its concerns at the regional level, such as with ASEAN, and engage with government authorities in certain countries. Secondly, it was noted that there is a lack of public understanding of the root causes of FoRB violations and discrimination, and more effective advocacy is needed. In this regard, a recommendation was made to develop different narratives that can be used by different parties, incorporating religious and human rights viewpoints that share a common goal. Coordinating such efforts would require the capacity and overview that only a regional network can provide. Thirdly, it was observed that the public and affected communities may not fully grasp their rights and how to seek help. Advocacy is also needed within the civil society sector. For example, a participant in an FGD in Myanmar noted that those outside the country often have an inadequate understanding of the situation and thus cannot advocate effectively. To address this, a reporting mechanism can be established within the SEAFORB Network, or a process can be created to convey concerns to established regional and international mechanisms.

The fourth area identifies various **capacity-building projects**. These include programmatic training for FoRB advocates in the region, the development of a curriculum for religious tolerance education, and initiatives to enhance information literacy in order to combat religious hate speech in the region. There were also proposals for the SC to lead a collaborative effort among FoRB advocates in the region to develop toolkits for interfaith engagement.

4b. Actor Mapping

Actors & Role

A number of actors have played a role in promoting and protecting FoRB across the region to varying extents. The nature of their involvement depends on two main factors: their role and mandate, and the environment that either enables or hinders their work.

Firstly, respondents from some countries noted the positive roles of **government authorities**. In countries with significant majority-minority conflicts like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, government agencies implement interventions such as religious dialogues. In Myanmar, the National Unity Government has been supportive and has facilitated trust and peacebuilding processes among different ethno-religious groups as part of the resistance effort. In recent years, Indonesia and the Philippines have also seen structural and legal reforms that acknowledge the existence and rights of certain religious minority groups in their respective countries.

There are also governmental and parliamentary networks at the regional level, such as the Southeast Asia Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (SEAPFORB), that involve parliamentarians advocating for FoRB. AICHR also has mechanisms with similar goals. However, these mechanisms face challenges as they have to adhere to the non-interference principle and make decisions based on consensus.

It was also noted that government authorities may lack the sophistication to effectively mediate religious conflicts and can be influenced by the opinions of majority groups. Additionally, many governments continue to deny or downplay the situation in their countries.

Secondly, **NGOs** working on the issue of FoRB in the region can be divided into two main groups. Human Rights NGOs focus on pushing for FoRB by promoting the implementation and adherence to international standards on civic, political, and social rights by the state. However, the term “human rights” can be sensitive, and local partners may choose to avoid cooperating with these organisations. Moreover, some human rights organisations are deterred from directly working on FoRB in sensitive countries such as Myanmar and Vietnam, as well as in countries where FoRB is not a national issue, like the Philippines and Thailand. Consequently, there is a general lack of NGOs working explicitly through the human rights/FoRB approach. These NGOs tend to operate within their specific sectors and have a limited impact on public understanding of the issues.

INGOs, with greater technical and financial resources, have more capacity for policy advocacy. This category includes human rights organisations such as Article19 and Amnesty International. However, concerns were raised about these organisations’ understanding of local contexts.

Other NGOs choose to promote FoRB through the concepts of “religious harmony,” “people-to-people connection,” and “peace.” This approach is often adopted due to sensitivities surrounding the terms “human rights” and FoRB. These organisations implement FoRB initiatives by emphasising cultural and community-based connections. While these organisations have successfully facilitated community-led dialogues and peace processes, respondents from Myanmar, Malaysia, and Indonesia noted that most NGOs working on these approaches underrepresent those advocating for structural and legal reforms.

It is worth noting that during discussions about the role of NGOs, Vietnamese respondents mentioned GONGOs representing sanctioned religious communities in international religious events to present a positive image of the country. In Malaysia, there are NGOs advocating for extremist views, such as anti-gender and sexual minorities or pro-Islamic Malaysia, at both national and international levels.

Thirdly, respondents also acknowledged the proactive role played by **religious communities** in promoting and protecting FoRB. After reviewing all six countries, it was evident that religious leaders are involved in dialogues, advocacy, and capacity-building initiatives related to the rights of their communities. In Indonesia, grassroots religious organisations work to counter the growth of extremism in the country. Some organisations bridge the gap between civic rights and religious traditions, such as Sisters in Islam, the GusDurian Network, or the Philippines Center for Islam and Democracy. Religious communities also engage in social work that extends their support beyond their own communities, fostering community-level harmony. This includes humanitarian and refugee work in Vietnam and Myanmar. In the context of resistance against the coup, Myanmar ethnic armed organisations have formed a coalition to work together despite their differences and find common ground in ending the dictatorship. Additionally, councils comprising different religious leaders have been established in countries like Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand to coordinate advocacy efforts.

At the international level, some respondents noted the work of organisations like Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Stefanus Alliance International, and Open Doors, which represent faith-based organisations and undertake advocacy, research, and capacity-building projects.

Fourthly, **international actors** are recognized for their important roles. They can be divided into two subgroups. Firstly, there are UN mechanisms. Respondents acknowledged the significant role played by UN agencies in providing funding to national CSOs for their FoRB-related work. Despite the coup d'état in Myanmar, some UN agencies continue to support local FoRB initiatives. However, they are occasionally criticised for accommodating regional governments and focusing solely on addressing violent extremism. UNHRC mechanisms, including the UPR and HRC mandate holders, provide avenues for FoRB actors to raise their concerns on the international stage. Secondly, foreign governments contribute to the promotion of international religious freedom through their consulates, embassies, and other agencies. The United States government, for instance, funds FoRB initiatives through agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development. Their agencies and consulates also actively monitor the situation in the region and conduct site visits when possible, providing a platform for victims to seek assistance.

However, both INGOs and international bodies receive criticism. The public in the region, to a certain extent, believes that these organisations have ulterior motives, which can be religious, economic, or political in nature. A shared recommendation in this regard is for these organisations to support Southeast Asian organizations that can better understand the regional context and propose recommendations that consider local circumstances.

Partnership Added Value

First, **national/subnational networks and coalitions** play a significant role. The level of networking within countries is most developed in Indonesia, where various formal and informal networks and coalitions exist. Thailand and the Philippines also have such networks, but they are limited to organisations operating in conflict-affected regions. Within countries, religious communities also make efforts to create networks among themselves. Informal networks are maintained in Vietnam and Myanmar, involving frontline service providers, NGOs, religious communities, and international actors. For example, Malaysia has the MCCBCHST, Thailand has the Interreligious Council, and Mindanao has the Bishop-Ulama Council. These networks aim to find common ground for religious communities to freely practise their religion.

Second, **international networks** are crucial. Affected religious communities in countries with repressive governments like Myanmar and Vietnam heavily rely on international networks and partnerships for resources and international advocacy on their behalf. This is due to the limited presence of in-country networks. The International Religious Freedom Roundtable was specifically mentioned as a venue for affected communities in the region to raise their concerns with international stakeholders. In other countries where in-country networks are maintained (Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand) or where there is resistance to foreign influence (such as Malaysia), substantive international partnerships are less prevalent. Respondents recognise the role of INGOs and UN agencies primarily as sources of funding. While international networks and initiatives are acknowledged, their role is seen mainly in advocacy and solidarity-building, particularly according to respondents from the Philippines.

Academic groups also rely on networking with universities or research groups outside their countries. For example, the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (Mahidol University), the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (Gadjah Mada University), and the Myanmar Institute of Theology maintain extensive networks with other universities working and conducting research on similar issues. Independent researchers from outside the country also coordinate with affected communities in Vietnam, connecting them with supportive organisations.

Third, there are limited **regional networks**. The International Panel of Parliamentarians for FoRB and SEAPFORB are some of the networks that allow parliamentarians to discuss FoRB issues at the regional level. While ASEAN and AICHR also have mechanisms addressing FoRB, they primarily focus on initiatives such as human trafficking and cultural dialogues. These networks enable authorities and government officials to coordinate FoRB protection mechanisms at the Southeast Asia level. Additionally, respondents note that there is a level of cooperation among Christian and Buddhist faith-based organisations and churches in the region, which could also include actors from outside the region, that engage in activities and advocacy related to restrictions on religious believers. Respondents from Indonesia and Malaysia also mentioned knowledge-sharing among “Nusantara” countries due to their similar contexts.

Partnership Gaps

Respondents have highlighted several concerns regarding current partnership landscape in the region.

Firstly, the level of in-country networking varies from country to country. In all countries, there is no nationwide network that systematically connects FoRB actors. There is also a lack of intersectional networking, with different actors and NGOs focusing on their specific sectors and limited communication among stakeholders. This creates difficulties in coordinating action at the national level, while international partners have to connect separately with different organisations or local networks.

Similarly, the level of cross-border partnership varies among the six countries reviewed. International partners are approached for support and funding. Given the repressive nature of NGO work in Vietnam and Myanmar, significant support comes from these actors. Actors from the Philippines also engage with international initiatives for solidarity-building. However, the role of international actors in the FoRB arena is less prominent in Thailand and Malaysia.

Secondly, in terms of approach, FoRB is often positioned within the wider human rights network/coalition in the region, where issues related to FoRB are not prioritised. This results in an advocacy strategy that lacks focus and may be less effective.

Thirdly, there is a lack of a network at the Southeast Asian level. While respondents may have connections within their own countries or with international partners outside the region, there is no platform or mechanism for different types of FoRB actors to connect with each other at the regional level. The SEAFORB Conference remains the primary mechanism for FoRB actors in the region to connect.

Resources & Sustainability

Despite the existence of networks, the overall depth of these networks remains limited. One significant constraint is the lack of adequate technical and financial resources among the network members. While the networks provide respondents with opportunities to connect and share information, their capacity to effectively coordinate values and advocacy strategies is often hampered. The networks may struggle to implement cohesive actions due to restricted resources and divergent priorities among their members.

Another notable aspect is the reliance on individual funding within these networks. In many cases, each member is responsible for sourcing their own funds, which can create tensions and challenges within the membership. The absence of a collective funding mechanism or a shared resource pool further hinders the networks' ability to undertake impactful initiatives and sustain their activities in the long term.

While networks offer valuable platforms for engagement and knowledge exchange, these limitations impede their full potential. To strengthen the networks and overcome these constraints, it is crucial to address the resource gaps, promote collaborative funding models, and foster a shared understanding of values and advocacy strategies among the network members. Such efforts would contribute to the growth and effectiveness of these networks in promoting and safeguarding FoRB across the region.

4c. SEAFORB Network

Aim

Respondents generally agreed on the purpose of the SEAFORB Network, which is to serve as a regional mechanism specifically focused on FoRB. They believe that adopting a FoRB/human rights approach would be sustainable and promote inclusivity by intersecting with efforts to address other human rights violations. In terms of positioning, the programmatic priority for the SEAFORB SC is to provide support to FoRB advocates - aligning with the expected intervention points mentioned in Section 4.1. To secure funding, the SC or its Secretariat/focal point as the central figure of the Network should explore external sources and distribute funds to network partners or lead consortium projects.

There were limited references to existing network structures that would be advantageous for the SEAFORB Network to adopt. When discussing these networks, respondents shared a similar positive aspect: they position the organisation representing the networks as a central entity that brings together independent local communities. The essence of these networks lies in their shared values and frameworks that guide the strategies of different organisations, with key personnel leading advocacy and external engagement, supported by a dedicated secretariat staff capable of coordinating within the network. These models are regarded as a principle-centred approach rather than a rigid structure. This flexible structure enables coordination among diverse actors, even in the face of limited resources. However, these networks received criticism for not being sources of funding themselves, as members still had to rely on their own sources of funding.

Structure & Membership

There was no specific and clear preference for the structure of the SEAFORB Network, and respondents saw value in both formal and informal modalities. In Chapter 2, it has been explained that data from surveys reveals a preference for a formal structure over an informal one. Yet, it is important to stress the fact that surveys asked closed questions and did not offer respondents the possibility to justify their answers (as mentioned in Chapter 2). However, conducting KIIs and FGDs allowed the research team to gain in-depth knowledge of this issue with elaborated answers, identifying a relative sense of indifference towards the formal or informal nature of the SEAFORB Network.

A formal network of member organisations would allow for more effective governance, coordination, and resource mobilisation. Meanwhile, respondents still prefer a level of autonomy for FoRB advocates to engage with the SEAFORB Network if and when they see fit to do so. The latter is also partly driven by the fact that government sensitivities could change, and FoRB advocates could be targeted if they were SEAFORB Network's "official partner". Another main reason, noted by other respondents, was the fact that they were generally indifferent as it is seen as not directly affecting their programme of work. Focus is given more to what support they need and how the SEAFORB Network should be placed to provide that needed support.

Nevertheless, a clear guiding principle on FoRB must be established for member organisations (should the network follow a more formalised structure) or loose partners (should the network be more informal) to follow. Similarly, it must have a clear goal and aim in providing support to civil society in the region. The Network must also be affiliated with or facilitate establishing civil society-led national-level intersectoral networks on FoRB ("country networks/roundtables") that would serve as SEAFORB's focal points at the national level.

A regional focal point is required to coordinate with partners within the Network and external stakeholders. There is no strong consensus on whether an active Secretariat for the Network must be established to fulfil that role. One concern raised by respondents was that an active Secretariat could be perceived as competing with local CSOs for funding and might shift SEAFORB's focus from being a coordinating mechanism to becoming an independent organisation in itself. Nevertheless, a point to be made is that there is an agreement that there should be a Secretariat/focal point to support the role of the SC.

There were no specific views on a particular approach to membership. However, comments were also made regarding other groups with which the Network could establish connections. This includes foreign, international organisations that could exert pressure on governments and provide funding for ongoing projects. The SC could also engage with similar FoRB networks in other regions such as those in South Asia or Scandinavia. Nevertheless, it is essential for the SEAFORB Network to ensure that these organisations support the SEAFORB Network under the defined aims and approaches. Another group mentioned is youth groups. This would serve as a long-term solution to counter the negative mindset prevalent in society, which enables violations against religious minorities.

4d. Risk Assessment

Risks can be classified into four categories. Firstly, there is the issue of physical safety. The level of physical safety threats posed by state authorities or extremist groups varies from country to country. Of particular concern is the state violence targeting religious minorities in Vietnam and Myanmar. Additionally, the military in the Philippines and Thailand monitors and harasses FoRB actors. The rising intolerance towards minorities also enables harassment and hate crimes by religious hardliners or extremist groups. In some cases, the state apparatus itself participates in promoting such hatred, as seen in Thailand.

To address these risks, several strategies for risk mitigation were proposed. One approach involves mapping the dynamics in the country/region, assessing the actors responsible for the risks (whether government or others), and identifying potential stakeholders for engagement, including international actors such as embassy officials or the UN. In countries with higher security risks like Myanmar, some suggested working discreetly to minimise risks, even though this may result in inefficiencies. In extreme cases, it was mentioned that terminating projects or temporarily suspending activities could be more beneficial.

The second category of risk pertains to the approach taken. As mentioned earlier, respondents generally agree that there is an overrepresentation of actors focusing on religious harmony at the societal level, while

fewer actors adopt a FoRB approach. However, for the SEAFORB Network to distinguish itself, adopting a human rights/FoRB approach has both benefits and concerns. On one hand, human rights is a sensitive matter, and actors face societal and legal pushbacks. On the other hand, this approach facilitates discussions about the rights being violated and the potential gains. It also enables the intersection of religious freedoms with other freedoms and rights. A regional FoRB network would foster connections among like-minded organisations and actors, providing a platform to work collectively.

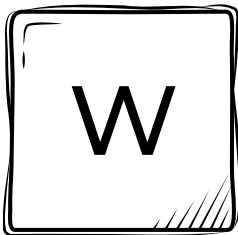
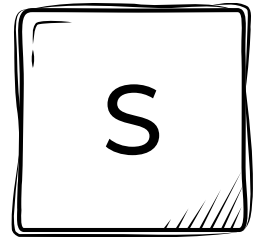
The third risk category is related to inclusivity. Given the diversity of the region, respondents, including religious minority groups and those collaborating with them, expressed concerns that not all groups are adequately represented in FoRB networks. Several measures for promoting inclusivity were identified. Firstly, the Network should pay attention to intrafaith dynamics, ensuring that minority sects are not overshadowed by mainstream sects within their respective religions. Secondly, the Network can create a safe space for minority groups to address their concerns, considering the threats they face from religious actors within their countries. Thirdly, inclusivity also extends to the intersection of gender and religion, as well as the role of youth. The SC must expand the scope of the Network appropriately to ensure a diverse range of actors.

The fourth risk category revolves around the perception of Western interference. While respondents acknowledge the critical role of international actors, they are concerned that the Network, particularly the SC leading it, may be viewed as non-local. To address this, there should be increased local representation in the decision-making process. This would allow stakeholders from the region to take ownership of the Network. Moreover, having a Southeast Asia-led network would enable connections with regional governments and existing regional mechanisms.

5. SWOT Analysis

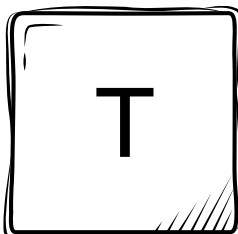
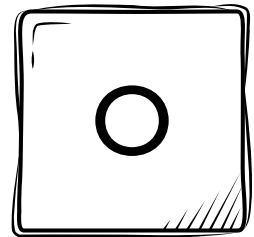
This section presents a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis associated with the SEAFORB Network that draws from the research findings in the chapters above. The SWOT analysis is based on the perception of FoRB actors in the region to the SEAFORB Network and therefore may include a wrong grasp of the roles of the Network and the SEAFORB SC. Nevertheless, the analysis serves as a valuable tool for evaluating how the Network is perceived against other internal and external factors that can significantly impact the Network's performance, strategy, and overall success.

- A strongly unified Steering Committee to assume directional decisions.
- The SEAFORB Network is the only civil society-led multi-stakeholder FoRB platform at a regional level.
- Capacity to obtain funding to convene the annual Conference.
- Capability to bring together a range of civil society stakeholders from different backgrounds and religions, primarily with the Network's annual Conference.



- The structure of the SEAFORB SC has yet to be formalised – at the moment it is not clearly defined.
- The predominance of Western donors and members in the steering committee creates a perception of Western dominance in the SEAFORB leadership.
- Perception of a lack of engagement with international human rights and religious freedom mechanisms.
- Limited funding opportunities for the Network's members across countries to implement consortium projects.

- The SEAFORB Network can consolidate itself as the first network of its kind in the region, putting it in a position of advantage to apply for funding and design and implement projects.
- The Network can use the existing local FoRB networks to consolidate its presence and become more visible in the region.
- National FoRB actors are generally willing to engage with the SEAFORB Network, creating new possibilities to use existing coalitions.
- There are increased chances to partner with international donors to obtain funding for the implementation of projects.



- Governments and hardline religious groups might not welcome a SEAFORB Network Secretariat in their jurisdiction.
- Partnership by national organisations with the SEAFORB Network to engage with local actors will be seen as colluding with foreign/Western organisations and also seen as a form of foreign interference.
- Some local stakeholders feel that their physical safety and integrity might be at risk if they affiliate themselves closely and/or publicly with SEAFORB Network.
- The SEAFORB Network is seen as competing with local organisations for funding and access to individuals and communities affected by FoRB violations.

5a. Strengths

The SWOT analysis recognises the SEAFORB Network’s strength in having a strongly unified SC. This cohesive group of individuals brings together diverse expertise, perspectives, and networks, enabling effective decision-making, coordination, and strategic planning for the network’s initiatives and activities.

The SEAFORB Network holds a unique position as the only civil society-led multi-stakeholder platform dedicated to FoRB at a regional level. This distinction enhances the network’s credibility, influence, and ability to drive positive change by advocating for FoRB rights and promoting collaborative efforts within the region.

Another strength lies in the SEAFORB SC’s capacity to secure funding for organising the annual conference. This financial support enables the network to convene an influential gathering, facilitating dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing among stakeholders involved in promoting FoRB.

The SWOT analysis also emphasises their ability to bring together a diverse range of civil society stakeholders from various backgrounds and religions, primarily through the annual SEAFORB Conference. This inclusivity and diversity of participants contribute to a rich exchange of ideas, perspectives, and experiences, fostering a comprehensive understanding of issues related to FoRB in the region.

Overall, these strengths provide a solid foundation for the SEAFORB Network, enabling the SEAFORB SC to leverage its inclusivity, funding capabilities, unique positioning, and a unified steering committee to advance its mission of promoting and protecting FoRB in the region.

5b. Weaknesses

The SWOT analysis identifies several weaknesses within the SEAFORB Network. First, the SC lacks a formalised structure. Currently, the Network’s structure remains loose and undefined and this is also the case for the SEAFORB SC. While respondents differ in opinion about the benefits of a formalised Network, the informal nature of the SC itself hinders efficient decision-making, coordination, and accountability. Without a clear structure, roles, and responsibilities, there may be challenges in ensuring the effective implementation of initiatives.

The analysis points out that the SEAFORB leadership’s heavy reliance on primarily Western donors and the presence of Western members in the SC may overshadow the importance of the network being Southeast Asia-led. This imbalance raises concerns about ensuring the network’s agenda and priorities align with the specific needs and contexts of the Southeast Asian region. It emphasises the necessity to diversify funding sources and membership to better represent the local perspectives and dynamics of the region.

Another weakness is the lack of engagement with formal international human rights and religious freedom mechanisms. By not participating in these mechanisms, the Network may miss opportunities to leverage international platforms and resources for advancing its objectives.

Finally, the SWOT analysis also highlights the Network’s limited funding opportunities for the FoRB actors within the Network to implement consortium projects. Insufficient funding can hinder the implementation of collaborative projects and initiatives, limiting the Network’s ability to address FoRB challenges effectively.

5c. Opportunities

The SWOT analysis identifies three opportunities for the SEAFORB Network. Firstly, there is the potential for the Network to consolidate itself as the first of its kind in the region through the efforts of SEAFORB. This unique positioning provides an advantage, as it grants the network the flexibility and autonomy to design and implement projects focused on FoRB. By leveraging this opportunity, the network can play a pivotal role in shaping the discourse and initiatives surrounding FoRB in the region.

Secondly, the SEAFORB SC can capitalise on existing local FoRB networks to enhance the strength and visibility of the SEAFORB Network in the region. By forging partnerships and collaborations with these networks, the SEAFORB SC can tap into its expertise, resources, and networks, thereby expanding its reach and impact. This opportunity allows for the exchange of knowledge and best practices, creating synergies that can amplify the Network's efforts in promoting and protecting FoRB.

The willingness of local stakeholders to engage with the SEAFORB Network opens up new possibilities to leverage existing coalitions, collaborate with local actors, and create a vibrant and inclusive community.

The SWOT analysis highlights the increased chances of partnering with international donors to consolidate the network's plan to improve FoRB in the region. Collaborating with international donors provides access to additional funding and resources, enabling the network to implement strategic initiatives and programs that foster greater awareness, protection, and promotion of FoRB rights.

5d. Threats

Firstly, the presence of governments and hardline religious groups who are uncomfortable with a network focusing on FoRB issues presents a significant threat. These entities may view the network's activities as challenging their authority or beliefs, potentially leading to resistance, opposition, or even active hindrance to the Network's work. Negotiating this delicate landscape requires strategic navigation and engagement to mitigate potential conflicts and ensure the safety and well-being of FoRB advocates who are part of the SEAFORB Network.

The second threat concerns the fact that some local stakeholders may perceive a risk to their physical safety and integrity due to the sensitive nature of FoRB in many environments. This apprehension can pose challenges to the SC's ability to engage and collaborate with certain individuals or groups who fear reprisals or backlash.

Third, the fact that the network is predominantly funded by Western organisations may be perceived as a form of foreign interference. This perception can undermine the Network's and particularly the SC's credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of some stakeholders, creating challenges in gaining trust, building partnerships, and navigating political and cultural sensitivities within the region. Establishing a balanced funding portfolio and actively engaging with local donors can help address these concerns and demonstrate the network's commitment to being inclusive and regionally led.

Additionally, a potential threat to the SEAFORB Network is the perception that a possible Secretariat/focal point competes with local organisations for funding and access to individuals and communities affected by FoRB violations. Limited resources and access can create tensions and challenges for collaboration. To address this, the SC should adopt a collaborative approach and actively seek partnerships with local organisations, leveraging their expertise, networks, and grassroots connections.

6. Conclusion

Research shows that FoRB in Southeast Asia is in jeopardy since the number of violations of religious rights, especially against those belonging to minority religious groups and others not sanctioned by the governments, remains as a key issue in the region. Additionally, the existing networks advocating for religious rights in the region are weak and need to have their capacity strengthened to make positive change happen.

In 2015, the SEAFORB Conference was launched, leading to the formation of the Network in 2017 to improve the rights of millions of citizens whose religious rights are not being respected. As part of its consolidation, this needs assessment report outlines the key issues that local actors in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam are currently facing and how they envision the future role of the SEAFORB Network and the SEAFORB SC overseeing such a network in the region.

This needs assessment report makes contributions to four key areas. Firstly, the key FoRB issues concern the imposition of cultural and religious values and norms that some majority groups try to impose on members of ethnoreligious minority groups and government restrictions over non-state-sanctioned religious groups. This creates tensions between different social groups that may lead to conflict and violence. In such a regard, the SEAFORB Network can contribute with advocacy and capacity-building efforts to support the work of FoRB advocates in the region.

Secondly, there are multiple actors influencing the religious landscape in countries in Southeast Asia, including governments, NGOs, religious committees, and international actors like foreign governments and international organisations like the UN. Although certain local FoRB networks do exist, they tend to be weak and, consequently, the capacity of local organisations is generally limited. In such a regard, the SEAFORB Network is seen as a potential mechanism to create a number of strong local alliances that are connected to a regional network and to the international community.

Thirdly, the SEAFORB Network is perceived as a regional CSO-led mechanism that brings together a range of stakeholders from different sectors to provide as many insights as possible on FoRB issues. Whether a formal or informal structure for the network is preferred was perceived with certain indifference among informants. Nonetheless, the main goals of the Network – whether presenting itself as a group of stakeholders or a singular formal organisation – should be advocacy, capacity building, and giving access to funding opportunities. This would require a more active and formalised SC that could implement activities under the SEAFORB banner.

Fourthly, advocating for FoRB rights presents some challenges. Working on issues concerning freedom of religion is perceived as dangerous or risky since religion is a sensitive topic in all countries that often results in physical attacks or harassment. Therefore, there is a remarkable sense of insecurity. The focus currently given to religious harmony also limits the coverage of FoRB-related activities in the region. Efforts must be made to ensure FoRB remains as the central element of the SEAFORB Network. It can also address intersectoral issues that local partners may be more interested in or feel more comfortable with such as religious harmony, peace-building, gender equity, minority rights, human trafficking, etc. Similarly, expanding the Network to be more inclusive and locally led to avoid being seen as a form of foreign interference is necessary.

While threats to FoRB are likely to persist, the SEAFORB Network is seen as an opportunity to make a collective effort to tackle religious violations in Southeast Asia. This collaborative effort is a unique opportunity to create capacity at a local level, while keeping regional and international connections, to ensure the right to FoRB for millions of people.

ANNEX

Annex 1: Assessment Framework

The Needs Assessment Report is informed by inputs from FoRB stakeholders and communities in Southeast Asia. It includes their expectations from the SEAFORB Network as well as the needs and priorities of SEAFORB members. Collectively, this guides the drafting of the objectives and priorities of the SEAFORB Network and how the Network can support the needs of FoRB stakeholders in the region. See below a list of themes, sub-themes and the corresponding questions:

Theme	Sub-theme	Question
FoRB Issue Mapping	FoRB Concerns	What are the perceptions/understanding of FoRB among FoRB actors in the region (CSO, religious organisations, INGOs, etc.)?
		What are the key FoRB concerns in Southeast Asia or in [country]? Why/how have they emerged? (historical, social, political, etc.)
	Addressing Concerns	Are these concerns being addressed? What are the different types of religious freedom interventions in Southeast Asia or in [country]?
		Has the work of individual, local or national-level stakeholders shaped government policies concerning FoRB?
		Have these measures been effective? Why or why not? What are the gaps that need to be addressed?
	Intervention Points: a) for SEAFORB Network b) for SEAFORB Members	<p>What are the types of intervention that could address these gaps? What will the benefits/constraints of each of these measures be?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advocacy at national, regional and international levels • senior-level interfaith dialogue for social cohesion and peaceful co-existence • religious tolerance & pluralism education • humanitarian support to refugee and asylum-seekers on FoRB grounds • evidence-based research • capacity-building events to CSOs, frontline workers, government officials • conferences & knowledge sharing and networking • intervention and/or emergency assistance for at-risk FoRB advocates • Community empowerment and development for the marginalised
Actor Mapping	Actor	Which actors work to promote FoRB in SEA at national and regional levels?
	Role	What are their specific roles in promoting FoRB subjects/fields they are working on? Government: which ministries, agencies? Non-government: which faith-based organisations, civil society groups? International/Regional: what are the main INGOs, international government?

Theme	Sub-theme	Question
Needs Mapping	Partnership Added Value	Do local CSOs promoting FoRB collaborate with one another, making use of existing networks, or do they tend to work on their own? What are the forms of partnership? knowledge sharing joint advocacy financial/resource support collaboration on research, events convening
	Gaps	What types of institutions are missing in this space? Which sorts of actors are missing at the national, regional and international levels?
		What types of work are already being covered and by whom? How can the SEAFORB Network provide support to existing works? What else can the Network do as a unique intervention point?
	Resource & Sustainability	Does the current partnership provide enough resources to strengthen FoRB in SEA?
SEAFORB Network	Structure	<p>How do SEAFORB Network partners expect the Network to be governed/managed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • structure: informal network or formal (election, by-laws, etc.) • What types of network structure meets the needs of members and is sustainable in their context? • What existing network structures have they found to be effective in the region and what are the key aspects/components of those bodies? • programming: active Secretariat, country-based programming, etc. • membership: organisational or individual membership-based
Security	Concerns	What are the security concerns of SEAFORB partners (and potential partners) with regard to collaboration under the SEAFORB Network banner?
	Effect on Network	What effects do these concerns have on the SEAFORB Network and Conference programming, communication and activities?

Annex 2: Table of Key Informants

Code	Country	Background	Date of Interview
KII1	Indonesia	Representative of a national FoRB, religious harmony network	6 Jan. 2023
KII2	Indonesia	Representative of an FoRB regional government network	16 Jan. 2023
KII3	Indonesia	Representative of a human rights organisation	25 Jan. 2023
KII4	Malaysia	Representative of an Islam-based human rights organisation	4 Jan. 2023
KII5	Malaysia	Representative of a national religious network	5 Jan. 2023
KII6	Myanmar	Representative of an academic institution on religion and religious harmony	7 Mar. 2023
KII7	Myanmar	Representative of a human rights organisation	7 Mar. 2023
KII8	Philippines	Representative of a community-based religious harmony organisations	25 Jan. 2023
KII9	Philippines	Representative of a community-based religious harmony organisations	28 Mar. 2023
KII10	Philippines	Representative of a national interfaith dialogue network	31 Mar. 2023
KII11	Thailand	Representative of a regional governmental organisations on human rights	18 Jan. 2023
KII12	Thailand	Representative of a national interfaith dialogue network	16 Mar. 2023
KII13	Vietnam	Researcher on FoRB in Vietnam	26 Jan. 2023
KII14	Vietnam	Representative of a human rights organisation	29 Mar. 2023
KII15	Vietnam	Coordinator between religious minority groups and NGOs	3 Apr. 2023
KII16	Indonesia	Representative of an academic institution on religion and religious harmony	14 Mar. 2023
KII17	Malaysia	Legal advocate focusing on religiously-oriented laws	5 Mar. 2023
KII18	Myanmar	Representative of a human rights organisation, focusing on the rights of Rohingyas	22 Mar. 2023
KII19	Thailand	Representative of a regional religious network	27 Mar. 2023

Annex 3: Table of Focus Group Discussion Participants

Code		Country	Informant Qualification	Date of FGD
FGD	No.			
FGDID	1	Indonesia	Representative of a FoRB-based journalist association	17 Mar. 2023
	2		Human rights researcher	
	3		Representative of a minority religious group	
	4		Representative of a national interfaith dialogue network	
FGDML	1	Malaysia	Representative of a religious NGO	27 Feb. 2023
	2		Representative of a cultural diversity NGO	
	3		Journalist working on religious harmony	
	4		Academic (Extremism & deradicalization)	
	5		Religious minority, Representative of a human rights NGO	
	6		Independent researcher on hate speech	
	7		Independent researcher on religious issues	
	8		Representative of a human rights NGO	
FGDMM	1	Myanmar	Representative of an NGO working on peace and conflict	27 Feb. 2023
	2		Representative of an NGO working on gender and equality	
	3		Researcher on human rights in Myanmar	
	4		Religious minority, Representative of a research institute on FoRB	
	5		Lecturer in politics	
	6		Master's degree student in gender and development studies	

Code		Country	Informant Qualification	Date of FGD
FGD	No.			
FGDPH	1	Philippines	Representative of an academic institution on religion and religious harmony	27 Apr. 2023
	2		Representative of a religious organisation	
	3		Representative of an academic institution on religion and religious harmony	
	4		Representative from the national human rights commission	
	5		Representative of an Islam-based human rights organisation	
	6		Researcher of a research institute attached to a political party	
	7		Researcher of a research institute attached to a political party	
	8		Representative of a regional parliamentary network	
	9		Representative of a national religious network	
	10		Representative of a national religious network	
FGDTH	1	Thailand	Representative of an academic institution on religion and religious harmony	20 Feb. 2023
	2		Researcher on FoRB and religious management in Thailand	
	3		Representative of a human rights organisation, working on the issue of the deep south	
	4		Representative of a religious council in Thailand	
	5		Representative of a religious community	
FGDVN	1	Vietnam	Representative of a human rights organisation working on the rights of ethnic minorities	8 Feb. 2023
	2		Representative of a human rights organisation working on the rights of ethnic minorities	
	3		Representative of a human rights organisation	
	4		Representative of a human rights organisation working on the rights of ethnic minorities	
	5		Persecuted individual	
	6		Persecuted individual	
	7		Persecuted individual	
	8		Representative of a human rights organisation	



Asia Centre is a civil society research institute in Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UN ECOSOC) based in Bangkok, Thailand. The Centre serves as a knowledge partner, undertaking evidence-based research on issues related to human rights and religious freedoms. It publishes baseline studies and policy toolkits at the request of CSOs, development aid agencies, faith-based organizations, INGOs, and policy-makers. Additionally, it convenes events such as conferences, seminars, webinars and workshops and amplifies its advocacy for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities by producing digital content for media and social media to widen public engagement.



The SEAFORB Network is network of civil society organisations, faith-based organisations, and practioners working on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Southeast Asia. The Network, as well as partners to the Network, gather annually in SEAFORB Conferences. The SEAFORB Network Steering Committee, created to organise the Conference, lead the Network and contribute financially to its activities. In 2022, the Steering Committee is made up of representatives from Asia Centre, Boat People SOS, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, International Center for Law and Religion Studies (Brigham Young University), Religious Freedom Institute and Stefanus Alliance International.