

ETHIOPIA

MID TERM REVIEW

Executive Summary



Introduction

JISRA (Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action) is an international interfaith consortium consisting of Mensen met een Missie, Faith to Action Network, Tearfund (UK and Netherlands) and Search For Common Ground. The Arabic word “jisar” means bridge, symbolising what JISRA aims to do: build bridges between divided communities. The JISRA programme (2021 – 2025) is being implemented in seven countries: Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, and Uganda. JISRA started as part of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs' political agenda to strengthen civil society under the Power of Voices policy framework. The program aims to promote peaceful and just societies where all people can enjoy Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB).

In Ethiopia, JISRA collaborates with national partners including ECFE, ECS, EEECMY, EIFDDA, EKHCD, EMDA, EMRDA, EMWACDC, EOC-DIACAC, IIA, and IRCE, and are supported by Tearfund and Faith to Action Network. Together these partners address discrimination and extremism in religious communities, strengthen the bridge between religious communities, and engage international, national and local authorities on issues of FoRB.

Mid-way through the programme, Vashi Impact Group conducted a mid-term review of the programme to study the effectiveness, coherence, and relevance of JISRA to the advancement of FoRB, and generate learnings and recommendations to improve the programme. VIG utilised a mixed-methods evaluation approach using primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative methods, including focus group discussions, key informant interviews, programmatic document reviews, and surveys.

Key Findings

In Ethiopia, JISRA addresses societal challenges like ethnic polarisation and the exploitation of religious differences. JISRA has demonstrated transformative impacts in fostering unity in religious peace forums, and building strong social bonds among diverse groups. Religious leaders play an important role in contributing to the awareness of rights, and JISRA also focuses on youth empowerment and gender equality. JISRA is also aligned with other actors promoting FoRB, through its partnerships and collaborating, fostering peace and inclusivity.

Government stakeholders, including national institutions and bodies like the Ethiopia Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Peace, highlight JISRA's positive impact on interfaith fora, contributing to peace and stability in Dodola. Collaborations with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) extend beyond governmental entities, fostering strong social bonds among diverse societal groups. Alignment with the Dutch Embassy emphasises a focus on preventing conflict, and the governance structure's transparency and equity, that contribute to maintaining strong relationships.

Peaceful and just societies where all enjoy FoRB

Intra-Religious Pathway

(within religious communities)

More open and tolerant religious norms and practices within communities.
Extremist tendencies diminished

Inter-Religious Pathway

(between religious communities)

Religious actors work together across religious divides
Religious communities jointly address common and mutual grievances

Extra-Religious Pathway

(Policy Influencing)

(Inter)National FoRB policies are increasingly religion- and context-sensitive
Rigorous security practices reduced

Cross-Cutting Pathway

(Women & Youth)

Increased representation of women and youth in decision-making
Increased capacity of CSOs

Intra-Religious Pathway

JISRA aims to achieve positive transformation within religious communities; religious actors and communities introspect on their beliefs, interpretations of religious texts, and daily norms and practices. This introspection includes the integration of religious, cultural, and social traditions, with local interpretations.

The MTR findings paint a picture of religious leaders playing a crucial role in shaping the community's values by consistently emphasising principles of peace and mutual respect. It underscored the role of religious leaders in promoting awareness of individual and collective rights, including freedom of religion and belief. The influence of these leaders extends beyond religious doctrines to guide the community towards a non-violent and respectful way of life.

Significant positive shifts are noted in attitudes towards women and youth, although challenges persist in translating these attitudes into concrete behaviours, requiring a closer examination of execution strategies, especially for marginalised groups. Despite defined gender roles, there is respect and open dialogue for conflict resolution, and religious leaders actively promote an environment where women are encouraged to share their insights and concerns. The enthusiasm of women in engaging in activities traditionally considered male-dominated signals a desire for equal participation and a breaking of gender stereotypes.



“Women are involved in various tasks, but it's important to emphasize that this doesn't imply they should exclusively emulate men's roles. It's recognized that women can both learn from and teach others, and they actively participate in various community activities. However, there are exceptions, such as leading the salat and Azan, which are traditionally not undertaken by women.” FGD Participants, Women, Dire Dawa, Ethiopia

Community-led actions against harmful practices, such as gender-based violence and exclusion of women from leadership roles within their religious practices show improvement, but challenges and some resistance to women in leadership necessitate sustained efforts and legal reforms. Their efforts encompass raising awareness, challenging traditional norms, promoting inclusivity in religious leadership, and developing concrete action plans. This multi-faceted approach reflects a comprehensive commitment to fostering gender equality and creating a more supportive and equitable community.

“The community and faith actors are addressing GBV related issues, exclusion of women in leadership in their religion. Community members have started tackling traditional norms against women. Religious leaders are providing awareness for their followers on GBV and human rights. They have also developed action plan in addressing GBV and FGM.” KII, Addis Ababa, 45 years,



Inter-Religious Pathway

Ethiopia's social fabric faces strains from polarisation and the politicisation of religious and ethnic differences. JISRA aims to counter this by promoting peace-making, conflict resolution, dialogue, and collaboration between faith groups. Religious actors are encouraged to support interfaith action within and beyond their communities, working together to promote faith-based diversity.

The MTR found that 80% of surveyed community members reported engaging and collaborating with others across religious divides; and older men were more involved than women and youth. Additionally, positive attitudes towards other religious groups significantly increased, indicating inclusivity and acceptance. The MTR also found that 66% of the surveyed community members were involved in addressing grievances. Due to JISRA, strong social bonds have been formed among linguistic, ethnic, and religiously diverse people, and the programme has promoted unity, tolerance, and FoRB. Community members are now respecting each other's beliefs and religion, have developed trust, and are working towards common goals in their community.

“We have cultivated a culture of respect for one another's religious beliefs, ensuring that we do not infringe upon the boundaries of fellow religious followers. This shared commitment to respecting each other's faith and personal convictions has enabled us to live as a cohesive and unified community, where individuals of different religious backgrounds coexist in peace and solidarity.” FGD Participant, Male, Youth Group, Dire Dawa, Ethiopia

Extra-Religious Pathway

JISRA focuses on influencing national and state laws, policies, and security practices that may adversely affect minorities, particularly in the context of the lack of separation between religion and state. The pathway emphasises representation and participation of religious actors and CSOs in policy-making processes, accountability mechanisms, and the development of context-sensitive FoRB policies. The MTR found that religious actors and CSOs have increased their engagements and consultations with community members, to better represent their needs.

JISRA promotes FoRB at the district level, emphasising constitutional rights, and advocacy towards government officials have led to violations being addressed, and fairer treatment of different religious groups. Lobby and advocacy efforts by JISRA have influenced policies, challenged inclusion barriers, and led to the establishment of new networks, for example formation of the Arsi Negele Interfaith Council to address conflicts peacefully. Ethiopian Women Faith Network was established too, to focus on gender inclusivity, and, an Inter-regional Advocacy Network Group was created, focusing on conflict prevention and resolution.



Cross-Cutting Pathway

JISRA is committed to increasing the representation and capacity of women and young people in decision-making towards FoRB, with a focus on gender-sensitive project cycle management, media engagement, and evidence-based advocacy. The MTR highlighted instances of local-level advocacy for increased involvement of women and youth in leadership and decision-making. JISRA Ethiopia has established a Women and Youth Supervisory Group and incorporates women and youth in leadership roles within local partners. Women across diverse religious backgrounds have also formed a collaborative network and a women's forum that meets regularly.

“One of our partners actually in Ethiopia, early in the last year where they either created a new board position, or they replace some of the directors, with a woman or with women, but that was the very first time in the history of the church, they would have a woman on kind of their senior governance levels.” KII, Global Stakeholder

Young people under 35 are being consulted in decision-making processes, with 78.9% indicating their inclusion, with young men being more frequently consulted than young women. While youth involvement in decision-making is relatively high, there are opportunities to further enhance their participation and representation.

The JISRA programme launched its Participatory Grant-Making (PGM) initiative in 2022, which integrates women and youth-led groups into economic activities and decision-making processes, representation, and advocacy initiatives. These groups actively identify and address inter-religious challenges, providing participants with a newfound sense of empowerment, influence, and the ability to nurture interfaith relationships, catalyzing a shift from violence to constructive solutions, and instilling participants with influence and community-driven change.

Recommendations

Address Operational Challenges within the Consortium: It is essential to actively address challenges related to inflation and internal communications within the consortium. The MTR recommends that JISRA has to develop adaptive strategies to ensure the smooth execution of activities, promoting transparency and alignment among consortium members.

Community Engagement, Awareness, and Bridging Attitude-Behaviour Gap: Intensify community engagement and awareness programs, utilising success stories and testimonials at the grassroots level to showcase the positive impact of the programme. Develop targeted interventions to bridge the gap between positive attitudes and behaviours towards marginalised groups, ensuring tangible actions align with changed perceptions.

Sustained Focus on Cross-Cutting Pathway: Given the foundational importance of the Cross-Cutting Pathway, sustain and intensify the focus on its activities. Explore strategies to elevate the impact of this pathway to ensure that the empowerment of women and youth, along with CSO capacities, remains a prominent aspect of JISRA interventions.

Expanding the reach of the programme: The MTR notes that the programme is limited to specific geographic areas. Whereas the impact might be evident in the targeted communities, the challenge is big and transcends the programme boundaries. Considering the financial and human resource implications, it is imperative to craft strategies to facilitate the cascading effect to other non-programme areas. This will ensure that the programme is not negatively impacted by effects from communities that are not touched by the programme.

Optimising Youth Engagement and Addressing Regional Challenges: Continue to tailor strategies for youth engagement, considering regional variations. Collaborate with local institutions and implement regular feedback mechanisms involving youth for more effective programming. Implement targeted awareness campaigns in regions facing challenges in the acceptance of atheists. Develop nuanced approaches considering gender and age dynamics. Further, recognise the age disparity in community engagement and consider implementing targeted youth empowerment programs. These initiatives can provide platforms for young people to actively participate in addressing grievances and conflicts, contributing to the overall resilience and harmony of the community.

Sustaining Collaborative Efforts and Partnerships:

Explore additional partnerships for sustained collaborative efforts, especially with organisations like UNICEF and local religious leaders. Strengthen collaborations for joint advocacy efforts, contributing to addressing critical issues related to child protection and peacebuilding that underlie current project objectives either directly or indirectly, and can better support in ingraining future project efforts in the communities. Regular communication and coordination mechanisms should be established to ensure continued effectiveness.

Government Stakeholders Collaboration and Formalization of Partnerships:

Enhance collaboration with government stakeholders by formalising existing partnerships through memoranda of understanding or formal agreements. Provide a structured framework for sustained cooperation and ensure mutual commitment to shared objectives. Establish regular dialogues and joint planning sessions to maintain an open line of communication, fostering a deeper understanding of each other's priorities and strategies.

Targeted Strategies for Security Engagement and Continuous Monitoring and Adaptation for Extra-religious Pathway:

Given inconclusive findings related to security actors, develop targeted strategies to engage with and influence security practices. Tailor advocacy efforts, establish partnerships with relevant stakeholders, and explore challenges and opportunities within the security landscape. Establish mechanisms for continuous monitoring and adaptation within the Extra-religious Pathway. Regular reviews and adjustments based on evolving challenges will strengthen effectiveness.

Review of the JISRA governance structure:

The governance structures of JISRA have played a pivotal role in fostering improved partner engagement, decision-making, and collaboration, which have been integral to the programme's success. Currently, the set targets for women and youth have not been achieved despite the evident efforts that are being made towards this. Intensifying efforts to ensure women and youth representation within governance structures is vital for a comprehensive decision-making process. The MTR recommends that the programme continue to seek and implement strategies that can expedite the inclusion of women and youth in the JISRA governance structures.

Evaluation of the PGM initiative: Lessons have been drawn showing that community members, particularly the youth and women can plan and execute interfaith peacebuilding initiatives if given opportunities. Due to the limited time under which the programme has been implemented, the impact of the initiative is yet to be concretely determined. It is therefore essential to pay particular attention to the evaluation of this aspect during the endline evaluation of the programme.