

MALI

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 “jizr” 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.

In Mali, JISRA has three partners working in diverse contexts of religious initiatives: Islam Population and Development Network (RIPOD), Movement of Christian Executives and Leaders (MCRC) and Jeunes avec une Mission (JEM), who are supported by Search for Common Ground and Tearfund. 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 freedom of religion and belief (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

The JISRA program in Mali emerges as a transformative force addressing the complex socio-political landscape of a country where Islam constitutes nearly 95% of the population. The other religions are acknowledged as their presence often leads to conflicts. JISRA demonstrated a successful track record for fostering interfaith collaboration, promoting unity among diverse religious communities, and easing tensions.

Beyond conflict resolution, JISRA's commitment to youth empowerment and the promotion of gender equality adds to its relevance, recognizing the central role of the younger generation and women in building a harmonious future. The Participatory Grant-making (PGM) initiative empowers local communities to address interfaith challenges, while international advocacy efforts amplify the cause of freedom of religion and belief.



Key Findings

JISRA also reflects a commitment to collaborate with government entities in Mali as acknowledged by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Worship and Customs for its role in promoting religious cohesion. Beyond government collaboration, JISRA extends its reach through partnerships with the media, CSOs, the Netherlands Embassy and within the Consortia.

The collaboration with the Netherlands Embassy is underpinned by concrete initiatives, including webinars addressing inclusion and positive recognition, highlighting the program's commitment to promoting core values.

Peaceful and just societies where all enjoy Freedom of Religion and Belief

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. The extent of the transformation towards inclusive and tolerant attitudes and behaviour towards marginalised groups (women, youth, and atheist) was explored. When it comes to positive attitudes and behaviour towards women, results show that positive behaviours (78.7%) exceeding positive attitudes (71.1%).

The results of the MTR show that despite high levels of positive attitudes towards women, some religious actors still oppose the inclusion of women as religious leaders. These feelings are still hampered by traditional and religious beliefs. Some religious leaders use their interpretation of religious texts to justify patriarchy and limit women to domestic roles. Those who opposed women's leadership in religious cycles believed that women could lead elsewhere except in religious cycles.

This shows the need to work on attitudes which have not changed significantly from baseline. Continuous efforts are needed to raise awareness, combat harmful gender stereotypes, and promote inclusive practices that contribute to the empowerment of women and girls. Similar trends were also noted regarding the inclusion of young people. There is room for improvement towards translating the positive attitudes into concrete actions.



“Religious leaders in our community are tackling common societal issues such as sexual violence, radicalisation, attitudes towards women, girls dropping out of school, early and forced marriages, moral decadence and respect for customs and traditions.” FGD Participant, Mixed, Youth Group, San, Mali

In terms of community acceptance of atheism, there is a growing acceptance of atheism within these communities, and this is likely due to increased education and greater exposure to atheists, as well as a growing understanding that atheists are not harmful to society.

Regarding the use of violence to support/defend their beliefs, the results are concerning as they suggest that there is a growing trend of people believing that it is acceptable to use violence to support/defend their beliefs. This is a concerning trend that could have serious consequences, including increased violence. There is a need to promote tolerance and understanding, which can be done through education and public awareness campaigns



Inter-Religious Pathway

JISRA focuses on peaceful coexistence 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 shows that there is a growing trend of community members working collaboratively across religious divides. JISRA has been working to promote interreligious understanding and cooperation and there has been a significant improvement in relations between different religious groups.

“JISRA's work has impacted conflicts in our region through the involvement and participation of conflict stakeholders (Muslims and Christians). JISRA project activities allowed everyone to develop constructive ideas to repair the fabric of social unity. JISRA plays an important role in these changes because of the vision and purpose of its activities. For me, this is the time and place to salute the JISRA project initiative, which has vigorously contributed to behavioural changes in our society. Through its activities, JISRA has made our society a lasting haven of peace. In our society, religious leaders are unifiers. Religious leaders engage in conflict prevention, management, and mediation to avoid legal action. The influence of our religious leaders has never been negative but always positive and conducive to social cohesion. FGD participant, male, community member, Ségou Niono, Mali



Inter-Religious Pathway

Community members' positive attitudes toward different religious faiths increased significantly, from 89% at baseline to 93.2% at MTR. Similarly, positive attitudes towards different religions showed a marked improvement, from 64% at baseline to 84% at MTR. This is a positive trend that can help build stronger, more cohesive communities. However, data shows there is still room for improvement. In addition, there were positive attitudes toward different religious denominations and religions suggesting that there is an increase in awareness and tolerance of different religions.

In terms of meaningful engagement across religious divides, the results show a worrying decline in the percentage of community members indicating they are actively involved in resolving grievances/conflicts. This suggests that there is a growing tendency to disengage from the community conflict resolution process. This decline in community participation in conflict resolution is a serious problem because it can have negative consequences, including an increase in conflict.

“Before the implementation of JISRA activities, problems between people of different religions were significant and precarious, such as distrust, stigma, lack of collaboration and communication. However, with the implementation of JISRA activities and numerous comments from beneficiaries, things have changed. Given the momentum gained by JISRA and its achievements, we can look forward to a conflict-free society in the coming days, even though it is recognised that conflicts are natural.” KII, woman, religious leader, Mali

Extra-Religious Pathway

JISRA aims to influence national and state laws, policies and security practices that are harmful for minorities. Under the improvements and implementation of laws and policies, the intention was to facilitate a change in policies, regulations, standards, and procedures in order to influence the approach utilised by security actors, and the associated responses by the security actors to those changes. Community consultation by CSOs and religious actors is crucial in the context of JISRA. The results showed that invitations from religious actors were slightly more frequent than those from CSOs. The MTR also finds religious institutions have a strong presence and influence within the community.

More externally, JISRA has been participating in international events such as the IPU Interfaith Conference and the EU FoRB Roundtable in Brussels with the Netherlands Special Envoy for the FoRB enables engagement with international decision-makers. The IPU Interfaith Conference brought together four delegates from JISRA, comprising representatives from Ethiopia, Mali, and the TF PB team. Participation in the EEAS civil society consultation ahead of the annual resolution on FoRB at UN HRC52 directly contributes to international advocacy and resolutions on FoRB. These resolutions, once adopted, can influence global policies aimed at combating harmful practices associated with religious discrimination. The findings highlight the importance of well-executed advocacy efforts to promote positive societal change and foster inclusion, highlighting the multifaceted benefits for diverse demographic groups and aspects of community life.



Cross-Cutting Pathway

The MTR has investigated the capacity building efforts of CSOs in implementing activities under the three pathways and representation / participation of women and youth in promoting FoRB. This includes their participation in various forums and platforms where decisions affecting the FoRB are made.

The capacities of consortium members have been strengthened on several topics such as conflict sensitivity, non-conflict advocacy, JISRA monitoring tools, non-confrontational advocacy for representatives of the consortium organisations, conflict sensitivity to strengthen staff capacity to apply conflict sensitivity in the implementation of activities while minimizing risks negative and maximizing the positive impact.

When asked if they had been consulted on decision-making issues, 47.9% of women indicated that they had been included in these processes. Regarding youth participation, the results suggest that although their participation in decision-making is relatively high, there are opportunities to further improve their participation and representation. young people play a positive role even in decision-making processes.



Cross-Cutting Pathway

Young people attribute their ability to participate to the acceptance that exists among community members, such that there is no age discrimination. This implies that young people are given space to actively participate alongside adults, even in decision-making processes, hence the positive changes observed in the country. Continued efforts to encourage and facilitate the participation of young people, particularly young women, are essential to ensure that their voices are fully heard and valued in decision-making processes.

Through the participatory grant-making initiative in Mali, five initiatives were selected by young people themselves and these comprised a training and awareness workshop on the culture of understanding and transformation of inter-religious conflicts, a community dialogue, a conference debate on the peaceful cohabitation of the two majority religions in Mali (Islam and Christianity), an inter-religious media program and a football match, as well as a training workshop for religious leaders (Muslims and Christians) on living together and peaceful cohabitation. These initiatives are an effective way of increasing the involvement of women and youth in community initiatives.



“Young people are a vital force working for the common good, and their energy, combined with their ability to exercise their rights, allows them to bring about positive change.” FGD participants, men, youth group, San, Mali

Recommendations

Addressing attitudinal barriers: It is pertinent to recognise and address attitudinal barriers, particularly towards marginalised groups. For women, continued efforts are needed to raise awareness, combat harmful gender stereotypes, and promote inclusive practices that empower women. The program needs to continue highlighting the importance of inclusivity in the communities and engaging religious actors so that they can address the barriers.

Address operational challenges within the consortium: It is essential to actively address challenges related to communication and collaboration between Mali and the other members of the global Consortia. While the MTR acknowledges that some challenges cannot be totally removed e.g., time zones, the Consortia can continue to dialogue and find working solutions that facilitate effective communication and collaboration within the Consortia.

Evaluate and communicate the impact of the PGM initiative: Since the PGM is a critical part of the program, a comprehensive evaluation is necessary at the end. Results should be communicated to stakeholders, promoting transparency, and demonstrating the effectiveness of the program.

Improve community participation in conflict resolution: The decline in community involvement in conflict resolution poses a serious threat to the impact and sustainability of program impact. The program must identify the factors that are discouraging people and then craft strategies to counter these.

Improve strategies to combat the use of violence: There is a need to promote tolerance and understanding, which can be done through education and public awareness campaigns. Therefore, the program should enhance the implementation of activities that promote education and public awareness.

Strengthen lobbying and advocacy efforts at all levels: JISRA's lobbying, advocacy and interventions have demonstrated effectiveness in advocating for the needs of community members at the local level. It is recommended to refocus attention on advocacy and lobbying efforts.