



Education and Freedom of Religion or Belief in South and Southeast Asia



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Recent global events, with the added overshadowing of the COVID-19 emergencies, underscore needed action on three interrelated topics: social cohesion, approaches to pluralism in relation to national identities, and action to promote freedom of religion or belief. There is a growing global consensus that knowledge about religions and beliefs is integrally part of fostering democratic citizenship and mutual respect, promoting social cohesion and pluralism, and tempering ethno-cultural tensions. It is an essential element in advancing Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) as an integral part of the human rights agenda. However, questions about how religions and beliefs should be taught and learned in schools are widely debated. Public education systems in South/Southeast Asia offer different models, ranging from no religious education to mandatory subjects-based instruction. Separate religious education systems beyond public education also play significant roles. Exploring common challenges and differences in approach can contribute to reflections on approaches to national and regional identities as pertinent institutions respond to the demands of the post-COVID recovery.

This brief explores practical and policy issues that link FoRB and social cohesion issues to education policy. The topic has particular relevance in the context of the regional policy focus on peacebuilding and FoRB and with urgent demands for review looking to post COVID reforms. The brief provides background on relevant international organization commitments to teaching religions and beliefs and offers a bird's eye view on how religious topics are taught in different South/East Asian countries, focusing on public education systems¹. The brief explores several approaches to educating about religions and beliefs and concludes with recommendations addressed to policymakers, curriculum specialists, and teacher trainers.²

Education on religious diversity

Understanding diverse religions and beliefs early in children's lives is important in all societies but has particular significance today in Southeast and South Asian contexts, given longstanding propensities towards misunderstandings, misconceptions, stereotypes, and provocative/hate-filled remarks about "others". Children learn about ethnic and cultural differences at a very early age, gathering information from various social institutions such as family, schools, places of worship, playgrounds, and media. Schools play an integral role in children's overall development through socialization, teaching and learning activities, and developing socio-cultural capital.

Knowledge of the values, religions, and beliefs of others is an important part of a quality education. Different national and international organizations recognize that young people should learn and understand religions' roles in developing a pluralistic world. Since children are ever more exposed to other cultures and identities different from their own through social media connectivity and other globalization events such as migration, the need for such education will certainly increase. Thus, a contemporary ideal and goal is to build into education systems effective programs that develop mutual respect for others and reduce

¹ Generally, refers to a school whose organization, financing and management are primarily the responsibility of, or under the primary oversight of, a public body (state, regional, municipal, etc.)

² Data for this brief comes from literature review and responses from the SEA-AIR project beneficiaries.

misunderstanding, stereotyping, and conflicts, as basic skills and attributes of common citizenship.

Why Should Religions and Beliefs be Taught at Schools?

Schools are social institutions where a child spends a significant time of her life. Schools, particularly public schools, are also microcosms of societies where both national ethos and social needs are negotiated through the interplay between the curriculum and pedagogy. Convincing reasons for teaching and learning religion at a school include:

- Education is often a key dimension of the long-term process of building peace, tolerance, justice, and intercultural understanding. Teaching and learning about each other's values and beliefs within a sociocultural and historical frame can facilitate mutual understanding and civic responsibility.
- Religion plays a significant role in history and society of mankind. People all over the world identify religions and beliefs as important forces in their personal, social, and spiritual lives. Thus, omitting religion can give students a false impression about this important facet of life.
- In an increasingly pluralistic world, lacking religious literacy of one's own faith system and others'—failing to understand the basic symbols, concepts, rituals, practices, and debates of different religions—can give students a partial, distorted view of the world.
- Learning *about* religions and beliefs within their socio-historical contexts can foster self-exploration where a student might appreciate and/or depreciate her own religion and belief, which then contributes to her identity formation at an early age. A critical approach to learning about religion offers opportunities to ask questions and find meanings that go beyond day-to-day negotiations with religion and belief.
- Learning about similarities and differences among religious traditions from an informed mentor such as a teacher can help promote respectful behavior towards others, particularly between majority and minority religious groups. In places with high religious and ethnic tensions, this type of learning can foster social cohesion.
- Carefully written textbooks can be instrumental in the process of building a cohesive society by raising awareness about others' religions and beliefs and fostering understanding of, and respect for, the diversity of beliefs.
- Well-trained teachers can situate religious texts and lessons in their contexts to facilitate critical thinking, broaden one's horizon and deepen one's insight into the complexities of both past and present.

International Approaches: Commitments to Education, Social Cohesion, and FoRB

Several international organizations play instrumental roles in bridging connections between education and FoRB:

UNESCO's longstanding commitments to inclusive and pluralistic societies shape the organization's decades long work in putting forward recommendations and guidelines on

peacebuilding education. The UNESCO 1974 “Recommendation Concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms” exemplifies earlier work in promoting human rights and ending discrimination in societies. Current UNESCO work involves facilitating Global Citizenship Education (GCE) that promotes more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure, and sustainable societies³. In addition, UNESCO works worldwide to support improvements in textbooks to make them more tolerant and inclusive with a particular focus on three key themes: religion, gender, and culture.

The **UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief** calls upon the member states to “promote, through the educational system and other means, mutual understanding, tolerance, non-discrimination and respect in all matters relating to freedom of religion or belief by encouraging, in society at large, a wider knowledge of different religions and beliefs and of the history, traditions, languages and cultures of the various religious minorities existing within their jurisdiction”. This goal is highlighted in the 2019 Resolution of the Human Rights Council.⁴

The **United Nations Alliance of Civilizations** emphasizes the importance of education in eradicating ethnic and cultural violence. The Report of the High-Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations (2006) observes, “Education systems, including religious schools, must provide students with a mutual respect and understanding for the diverse religious beliefs, practices and cultures in the world.”⁵

“The Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crime” is a human rights-based effort of the **United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect**. The 2017 document highlights three main clusters of recommendations that aim to prevent, strengthen, and build against violence and atrocities. Education falls under the “strengthen” category and aims to target religious leaders and actors to address the lack of religious freedom literacy.⁶ The “Rabat Plan of Action” (2013) also acknowledges education’s transformative power on the prohibition of incitement to national, racial and religious hatred.⁷

The **Group of Twenty, or G20**, the premier forum for international cooperation on urgent economic and financial agenda, brings together representations from the world’s major economies comprising of around 90% of global GDP, 80% of global trade, and two thirds of world’s population.⁸ G20’s interfaith forum policy brief (2020) calls to action interfaith

³ “Global citizenship education,” UNESCO, accessed January 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/themes/gced>

⁴ “Freedom of religion or belief: resolution / adopted by the Human Rights Council,” UNHRC, accessed January 2021, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3873364?ln=en>

⁵ “Alliance of Civilizations – Report of the High Level Group,” UNAOC, 13 November 2006, <https://www.unaoc.org/resource/alliance-of-civilizations-report-of-the-high-level-group-13-november-2006/>

⁶ “Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence That Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes,” UNOGP, July 2017, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Plan%20of%20Action%20Advanced%20Copy.pdf>

⁷ “Between Free Speech and Hate Speech: The Rabat Plan of Action, a practical tool to combat incitement to hatred,” OHCHR, 21 February 2013, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/newsevents/pages/therabatplanofaction.aspx>

⁸ “The Group of Twenty - G20,” 20 August 2012, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/g20-august-2012.pdf>

approaches to inclusive education. The brief identifies three areas of priority to explore in a cross-sectional effort to promote inclusive and caring education:

- Advancing wellbeing of all as the aim of education
- Ensuring participation of all learners within richly inclusive learning environments
- Aligning teachers' professional development with the wellbeing and inclusion focus

It calls for forming partnerships among schools, families, and faith communities to support all children, particularly during and post COVID19 pandemic. The Forum highlights the importance of listening to the concerns and proposals of young people in the process of advancing education policy reforms.

Among relevant regional organizations, the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)** is pivotal in advancing social progress, cultural development, and regional peace. ASEAN brings together and provides a regular platform for the education ministers from the member states during the ASEAN Education Ministers' Meetings (ASED). The 2012 ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Education (SOM-ED) set their mission to enhance regional understanding, cooperation, and unity of purpose among Member States and achieve a better quality of life through education.

The **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)** works to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and improve the quality of life. Education, security, and culture are common areas of cooperation among the member countries under the SAARC purview. As part of their continuous work in the field, the New Delhi Declaration on Education (2014) was put forward by the Ministers of Education and heads of delegation of the SAARC member states, affirming education as a human right and recognizing "the central role of education in ensuring inclusive and sustainable development, accelerating social transformation, achieving gender equality, and promoting peace, tolerance and social cohesion."⁹

Several Europe based organizations, charters, and regional commitments highlight the importance of intersections between education and FoRB, which can be used as a reference for the South/East Asian regional bodies such as the ASEAN and SAARC. For example, the Council of Europe, a leading human rights organization, has a Parliamentary Assembly that comprises of 324 members of parliament from the 47 member states. The Assembly recognizes and promotes education about religion at the primary and secondary levels¹⁰ in the member states. The European Union has put forward a Charter of fundamental human rights that applies to all citizens of Europe. Article 14 of the Charter (Right to Education) highlights both founding educational establishments and upholding parents' rights to ensure their children's education "[...] in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions shall be respected, in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of such freedom and right."¹¹

⁹ "New Delhi Declaration on Education," accessed January 2021, <https://www.saarc-sec.org/images/areas-of-cooperation/ESC/Education%20Files/NEW%20DELHI%20DECLARATION%20ON%20EDUCATION.pdf>

¹⁰ "Education and religion," Recommendation #13.1., Committee on Culture, Science and Education, 19 September 2005, <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=11017&lang=EN>

¹¹ "EU Charter of Fundamental Rights: Article 14 – Right to Education," EUFRA, 14 December 2007, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/eu-charter/article/14-right-education>

Right to quality education for all is highlighted in the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** of the 2030 Agenda. The fourth goal of the 2030 Agenda addresses global commitment to inclusive and equitable education for all without any biases, discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization based on any religious, racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences, which has particular relevance to FoRB. Religious entities such as churches and mosques often provide education to the most marginalized children. On the other hand, religious minorities and indigenous populations face socio-political discrimination and violence that also include restricted access to public education, biased curriculum and poorer teaching and learning materials, discriminatory enrollment practices, harassment and bullying at classrooms in many contexts.

In the following section, a brief analysis of the interrelation between FoRB and education is presented in the context of South and Southeast Asia.

How are Religions Taught in South/East Asian Countries?

Bangladesh

Despite Bangladesh's apparent ethnic, linguistic, and religious homogeneity (98% Bengali, 90% Muslim), there are at least 45¹² smaller ethnic groups, several indigenous languages, and all major and some folk religions and beliefs; Bangladeshi Islam is far from monolithic. Growing signs of interfaith conflict, growing Islamic fundamentalism, and violent attacks on secular activists and intellectuals undermine both the reputation and reality of a harmonious society.

Bangladesh takes a diverse approach in teaching religions in its complex education system. The national curriculum mandates that all four major religions of the world (Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism) should be taught from grade 3 to 10 at all public and private schools that follow the curriculum.

Each student is permitted to study a religion that her family subscribes to. There is no option to formally learn about any religion other than one's own. Since religion is a mandatory subject and it is tested in all annual as well as public examinations, a non-believer student must also select one of the four religions during her education under the national curriculum. The Islamic madrasas, particularly unregulated private ones, solely teach Islamic texts to prepare Muslim clergy. Similar education for religions prevails in Buddhist monasteries and Christian seminaries in the country.

Bangladesh's efforts to teach religions often are undermined by lack of trained teachers particularly in the minority religions, non-participatory education policy creation and implementation, lack of child-friendly pedagogy, high dropout rates, and overall poor

¹² "Ethnic Minorities in Bangladesh and Their Human Rights," Daily Sun, 9 April 2019, www.daily-sun.com/post/383942/Ethnic-Minorities-in-Bangladesh-and-Their-Human-Rights

education quality. There is currently no scope for interfaith learning or learning about religions and beliefs in the formal and non-formal education sector of the country.¹³

Myanmar

Myanmar's (previously called Burma) religious landscape comprises 88% Theravada Buddhists, 6% Christians (primarily Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans, along with several smaller Protestant denominations), and around 4% Muslims (mostly Sunni)¹⁴. There are small communities of Hindus and practitioners of traditional Chinese and indigenous religions, and a very small Jewish community in Yangon.

The right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) (together with other human rights) presents unique challenges for Myanmar. It involves fundamental issues of national identity and governance; pertinent actions and approaches affect both international relations and national development in significant ways.

The complex issues that are at stake center on the privileged role of Buddhism, understandings of citizenship and accompanying rights, and both governmental and societal treatment of and attitudes towards people following different religious traditions.

Each issue is further complicated by the overlapping involvement of ethnic, racial, class, economic, and cultural factors, alongside legacies of Myanmar's history.¹⁵

Myanmar has adopted a new¹⁶ curriculum that introduces subjects such as Morality and Civics that teach *about* all major religions from grade 2 to 10. According to the Myanmar National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 2015), one of the major goals (#2) of the reform is to "Develop 'union spirit' and appreciate, maintain, and disseminate languages and literature, cultures, arts and traditional customs of all national groups."¹⁷ In addition to the schools under the national curriculum, a number of monastic schools prepare Buddhist monks and nuns in the country. Critics argue that these monastic schools have "a limited role but are unequivocally subordinate to the state" under the historically authoritarian governments.¹⁸

¹³ For a detail discussion, please see "Faith and Education in Bangladesh: Approaches to Religion and Social Cohesion in School Textbook Curricula" available at <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/faith-and-education-in-bangladesh-approaches-to-religion-and-social-cohesion-in-school-textbook-curricula>

¹⁴ Based on 2018 data. Source: SEA-AIR Country Brief: Myanmar

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ "New basic school curriculum 'a hit with students, parents,'" Myanmar Times, 06 August 2019, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/new-basic-school-curriculum-hit-students-parents.html>

¹⁷ "Basic Education Curriculum Reforms in Myanmar and the Role of Social Studies," The Journal of Social Studies Education in Asia, 2020, <http://jerass.com/jssea/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/04WintZawHtet.pdf>

¹⁸ "School, state and Sangha in Burma," 2003, https://www.academia.edu/892300/School_state_and_Sangha_in_Burma

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has one of the highest literacy rates in South Asia despite the country's decades-long history of civil war and environmental disaster exposures. Although education access and quality vary greatly geographically, especially in the regions that are still recovering from the scars of the civil war, Sri Lanka performs well in other educational indicators such as youth literacy rate at 98.77%, highest in South Asia.¹⁹

In Sri Lanka, religious education for children generally takes three different forms: (a) as a mandatory subject in schools under national curriculum (b) outside of school in 'Sunday schools' and (c) training for priesthood. Major religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam) are taught and tested at Sri Lanka's state schools from grade 1 to 11 as mandatory subjects. Religion teachers in these schools are often trained subject matter specialists and are included in the government pension plan. There are separate schools managed by religious bodies such as Hindu Schools, Catholic Schools, and Islamic madrasas; many of which fall under the catchall "Sunday schools."²⁰ While secular schools teach religions as subjects and focus more on factual information of particular religions, Sunday schools emphasize on the practice of religion.

Islamic education in Sri Lanka is highly decentralized and often remain beyond the purview of the Ministry of Education (MoE). There are 1,669 madrasas and 317 Arabic schools registered under the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs all over the country, although data on them is limited.²¹ Sunday schools' curricula are often set by non-governmental religious bodies (Young Men's Buddhists Association for Buddhist schools and established Churches for Christian schools; however, there is no centralized organization in charge for Islamic schools). Education for clergies takes place in Viharas and seminaries. Data is limited on Islamic clergy (Moulavi) training.

Despite several concerted efforts to teach religion in Sri Lanka's schools, challenges prevail in the actual efficacy and quality of interreligious knowledge acquired by the students.

For example, Peter Colenso, a children's rights activist, writes in his 2006 article that 49% of 14-year-old children reported that they had no close friends from other ethnic groups.²² Tilakratna (2016) argues that Sri Lankan language textbooks are ripe with Sinhala Buddhist values.²³ Rural schools often teach only one religion due to lack of resources and infrastructure.

¹⁹ "Education in Sri Lanka," World Education News + Reviews, 16 August 2017,

<https://wenr.wes.org/2017/08/education-in-sri-lanka>

²⁰ "Need a Common Guiding Principle for All Religious Education | Daily FT," accessed February 23, 2021, <http://www.ft.lk/sujata-gamage/Need-a-common-guiding-principle-for-all-religious-education/10513-679158>.

²¹ *ibid*

²² "Education and social cohesion: developing a framework for education sector reform in Sri Lanka," 2006, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057920500331470>

²³ Tilakratna, N. (2016) Teaching the Nation: Recontextualized National Identity in Sri Lankan English Language Textbooks

Indonesia

Indonesia takes pride in its national motto, “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika,” which means unity in diversity. Indonesia is the world’s largest Muslim country and the third-largest democracy, with six official languages and more than 240 ethnic groups.

Today, debates around religion center on understandings of security threats (including both extremist tendencies and public order and morality), and on respective responsibilities of the central government versus local authorities for oversight and regulation of religious matters.

Human rights are tightly associated with religious dimensions, and their significance is actively debated, notably by a vibrant civil society that includes some of the world’s largest religious organizations.

Indonesia’s public schools offer compulsory religious education. Similar to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, all major religions are taught as individual subjects in the schools to the students who adhere to those religions. The state schools differ from other forms of religious schools present in the country. There are three different types of Islamic education options: Sekolah Islam (Muslim School), Madrasah (Islamic School), and Pesantren (Islamic Boarding School).²⁴ Pesantrens are Indonesia’s oldest form of education institutions that used to offer religious education among Muslim children. Currently, both madrasas and Pesantrens offer secular subjects along with religious education (ibid). Sekolah Islam creates its own religious education curricula, the Ministry of Religious Affairs does not supervise their religious education (ibid).

Thailand

Religious discrimination and religiously motivated violence are not central concerns in Thailand, although freedom to practice religion is linked to broader contemporary concerns such as human rights, national identity, and social harmony. Buddhism receives most consideration as the faith of a large majority of the population (some 93%). In some respects, Buddhism is a de facto national and state religion, tightly associated with the nation’s history and identity. Islam, Thailand’s second largest religion (5% of the population), receives special attention from the state and society. The state has attempted to regulate institutions and practice, as well as to facilitate them.²⁵

²⁴ “Challenging Moderate Muslims: Indonesia’s Muslim Schools in the Midst of Religious Conservatism,” 09 October 2018, https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjnhJ681tXtAhWP2FkKHSvFDjQ4ChAWMAB6BAGHEAI&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.mdpi.com%2F2077-1444%2F9%2F10%2F310%2Fpdf&usg=AOvVaw3Qjhs5Pbcn_94M8FyEOWuH

²⁵ “Thailand Country Profile on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB),” World Faiths Development Dialogue, November 2019, <https://live-peacemakersnetwork.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Thailand-Country-Profile-on-Freedom-of-Religion-or-Belief.pdf>

For many decades, Thai public education has maintained a Buddhist ideology and praxis. Buddhism is taught, both overtly and covertly, from grade 1-12 in all state-funded schools.

For many decades, Thai public education has maintained a Buddhist ideology and praxis. Buddhism is taught, both overtly and covertly, from grade 1-12 in all state-funded schools. In terms of the Islamic education in a Buddhist majority country like Thailand, there has been a “push and pull” relationship between the Muslim *ulamas* and the state over the control of governance and curricula.²⁶ Islamic education institutions in Southern Thailand generally fall into three categories: a) government sponsored schools where both Islamic and secular subjects are taught in Thai language, b) private Islamic madrasas that also offer a blend of Islamic and non-Islamic subjects, and c) the pondoks that offer Quranic education in a highly decentralized manner. Estimates suggest that around 85% of Malay-Muslim students in the Southern states attend Islamic schools making them one of the most popular forms of schooling in the region among the Malay-Muslim minority community.²⁷ Out of around 500 pondoks in southern Thailand, only about 300 of them are registered with state authorities.²⁸

The topic of religious education has been a source of debate and tension in Southern Thailand rife with identity politics between the majority and minority groups. The Malay-Muslim communities see the pondoks as important historical and cultural markers that differentiate them from the majoritarian Thai identities.²⁹ The government has made several attempts to “modernize” and regularize pondok curriculum: by changing the medium of instruction from Malay and Arabic to Thai in the 1930s and 1940s, offering to privatize pondoks for government subsidies in the 1960s, and more recently introducing the National Education Act of 1999 that holds the state responsible for offering nine years of compulsory education along with 12 years of free education. Malay-Muslim communities have often resisted these forced assimilation policy changes through developing a pan-Malay nationalism and Islamic revivalism and a more practical solution—sending children to the Middle East for education.³⁰ However, recent studies show that the pondoks are integrating the so called secular and vocational subjects in their curriculum.

²⁶ Hefner (2006), cited in Porath, Nathan. “Muslim Schools (Pondok) in the South of Thailand Balancing Piety on a Tightrope of National Civility, Prejudice and Violence.” *South East Asia Research* 22, no. 3 (2014): 303–19.

²⁷ “The Structure of Islamic Education in Southern Thailand.” In *Islam, Education and Reform in Southern Thailand: Tradition and Transformation*, 48–75. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2010, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/islam-education-and-reform-in-southern-thailand/structure-of-islamic-education-in-southern-thailand/8FA489E31ED62237C6179AB7EF995296>

²⁸ “The Pondok Schools of Southern Thailand: Bastion of Islamic Education or Hotbed of Militancy?” RSIS, accessed February 24, 2021, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/628-the-pondok-schools-of-southern/#.YDaiuXI0mhf>

²⁹ “Islamic Education in Thailand Pattani Muslim Minority: What Are the Institutional Continuity and Change?” *Tadris: Jurnal Keguruan Dan Ilmu Tarbiyah* 4, no. 1, 127–34, 28 June 2019, <https://doi.org/10.24042/tadris.v4i1.3753>.

³⁰ “The Pondok Schools of Southern Thailand: Bastion of Islamic Education or Hotbed of Militancy?” RSIS, accessed February 24, 2021, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/628-the-pondok-schools-of-southern/#.YDaiuXI0mhf>

Areas for particular attention and advocacy

The country cases highlighted above underscore the diverse sociocultural, religious, and political contexts in which religious education takes place. Generally, teaching and testing about different religions is treated as a separate subject, in concentrated forms. There is little institutional structure for interreligious and interfaith teaching and learning at schools in any of the countries reviewed. Religious schools rarely engage in comparative religious teaching and learning. Teachers are seldom trained in teaching minority religions. Rote memorization, standardized testing, and scarcity of interreligious education materials are among significant pedagogical challenges.

The following steps could support efforts by policymakers at the regional and national levels, curriculum experts, and teacher trainers in offsetting these challenges as they strive for more meaningful education about religion at schools:

FoRB and Human Rights as a foundational principle in educational policy. Religious education approaches could usefully be linked more explicitly to a human rights-based approach. This could underscore the importance of ensuring that each student's identity, participation, and integrity in the education process is respected equally, regardless of the student's religion, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic background, and any other factors. A human rights-based approach places the focus on common values and principles, rather than on differences. All students, parents, and teachers should be knowledgeable about their rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.

A participatory approach to religious education ensures equal participation of all stakeholders in the planning and implementation of policies and practices ranging from developing a curriculum, preparing textbooks, and delivering class lessons. Since religions and beliefs can deal with highly sensitive issues, more participation of concerned parties should open up opportunities for discussion, reduce tension, counter stereotypes, and encourage ownership.

Ongoing assessment and review of the current curriculum would benefit the policymakers and curriculum specialists in sorting out existing biases against minorities in the textbooks, teacher training manuals, organization of the school days, testing regimes, and cultural observation to name a few. Existing curriculum and textbooks often teach religions separately and contain negative stereotypes and biased historical and cultural representations. Countries should consider teaching about religions from an early age. Countries should also review and update their curricula to be more inclusive and freer from biases/stereotypes. Curricula should have provision for encouraging children's exposure across religions through visiting religious and historically important sites and meeting and interacting with children from different religions and faith traditions.

A friendly and welcoming mechanism to identify, report, and respond to discriminatory practices, violence, and hate crimes at the school premises would help mitigate in-school violence and bullying that are religion and belief inspired. Teaching children about what to report and how, offering to listen children's experience, validate their concerns, taking detail notes, reporting to the respective authorities, and following up with actions are some of the essential stages of such mechanism.

Evidence based guidelines for teachers on how to teach sensitive subjects could help teachers who are hesitate and/or poorly prepared to teach religion at predominantly secular schools or secular topics at religious schools.

Critical thinking pedagogies should be embedded in every curriculum from grade school to university-level. *Peace and civic education* should also be incorporated in curriculum so that children and youths can learn about benefits of social cohesion and are aware of atrocity crimes and human rights violations from an early age.

A central recommendation is that governments and their religious counsellors consider a significant shift towards teaching and learning “about” religions and beliefs at school, as opposed to teaching and learning individual’s own religion only. Teaching about religion involves approaching the ethics, culture, philosophy, and history of religions academically, not devotionally. Some of the main assumptions underlying this approach include the following goals:

- Raise awareness about religions but does not pressure students to accept any religion
- Schools sponsor study about religion but not the practice of religion
- Schools teach all religions comparatively, but do not promote or denigrate any
- Teaching about religions and beliefs must be done in a fair, accurate, respectful, and pedagogically sound ways
- Teachers should be highly committed to promoting religious freedom and conserving students’ rights
- Preparing a ground for teaching and learning about religion can take a very long time. The process should be participatory, democratic, and well supported as well as funded.

Ways Forward

Knowledge about religions and beliefs can reinforce appreciation of each other’s right to freedom of religion and belief and of human rights more broadly, without compromising one’s own values and beliefs. In a democratic and pluralistic society, if citizens are well aware of their ethnic, linguistic, and religious similarities and differences, peaceful cohabitation is possible. However, teaching and learning about religions and beliefs at schools can only be beneficial if broader sociopolitical narratives and policies are in place that underscore diversity, multiculturalism, and social cohesion both at the national and regional levels.

Relevant policies need to be reasonably adaptive to distinctive religious and sociopolitical needs based on each country’s unique context. Such adaptability and flexibility might be the first step towards mutual tolerance and respect. Since there is already a general consensus among the global communities in support of FoRB and education, both ASEAN and SAARC education policymakers can seek out guidance, resources, and existing expertise in this field. The benefits are twofold: the countries can build on the existing best practices and recommendations and the existing frameworks and methodologies can only get more sophisticated from highly diverse and complex cases from South/East Asian countries.

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