



USAID
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BUILDING BRIDGES IN DEVELOPMENT:

USAID's Strategic Religious Engagement Policy

U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

SEPTEMBER 2023



BUILDING BRIDGES IN DEVELOPMENT: USAID'S STRATEGIC RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT POLICY

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Cover Photo by Mercy Corps (Niger)
Above Photo by USAID/Tanzania

Strategic Religious Engagement (SRE) takes multiple forms in development and humanitarian assistance. The photos illustrate the various ways in which SRE is integrated across sectors and regions.

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I. Vision and Purpose

Religious communities and faith-based organizations (FBOs) are on the front lines of development and humanitarian assistance in every part of the world. They offer perspectives that enable better understanding of community needs, hold positions of trust and leadership within societies, and can serve as effective liaisons between citizens and governments in times of conflict and humanitarian crises. USAID has a long history of working successfully with religious communities and FBOs in our partner countries around the globe promoting inclusive and locally led development and implementing humanitarian assistance activities. Building bridges with religious communities and FBOs expands USAID's opportunities to create effective, sustainable development solutions and deliver effective humanitarian assistance to address the world's greatest challenges.

“Building bridges with religious communities and faith-based organizations expands USAID's opportunities to create effective, sustainable development solutions and deliver effective humanitarian assistance to address the world's greatest challenges.”

USAID works with a range of partner organizations, and this policy focuses on its engagement with religious communities and FBOs, local and global, as a coordinated Agency approach that advances locally led action for sustainable solutions within our broader development agenda.¹ This first USAID policy on engagement with religious communities and FBOs, existing and prospective, enables the Agency to be more inclusive and increasingly effective in its partnerships with local actors. At the same time, the policy acknowledges sensitivities and questions about USAID's work and provides a foundation for grounding our efforts in the established constitutional, legal, and policy framework of the United States government (USG).² The policy provides guidance on how to build bridges with religious communities and FBOs (when and where appropriate), outlines foundational principles, and defines an operational framework for USAID staff.

The policy seeks to advance three goals:

1. Improve collaboration between USAID and religious communities and FBOs to advance shared priorities and maximize sustainable development and humanitarian assistance outcomes.
2. Strengthen the capacity of USAID's workforce to conduct Strategic Religious Engagement (SRE)³ with respect and inclusivity, in coordination with the USG interagency and our partner community, and in compliance with legal requirements.
3. Increase the integration of SRE as an evidence-based, principled approach to addressing development and humanitarian challenges across sectors and in countries where USAID has a development presence.⁴



Photo by Raafat Khiri/USAID (Tunisia)

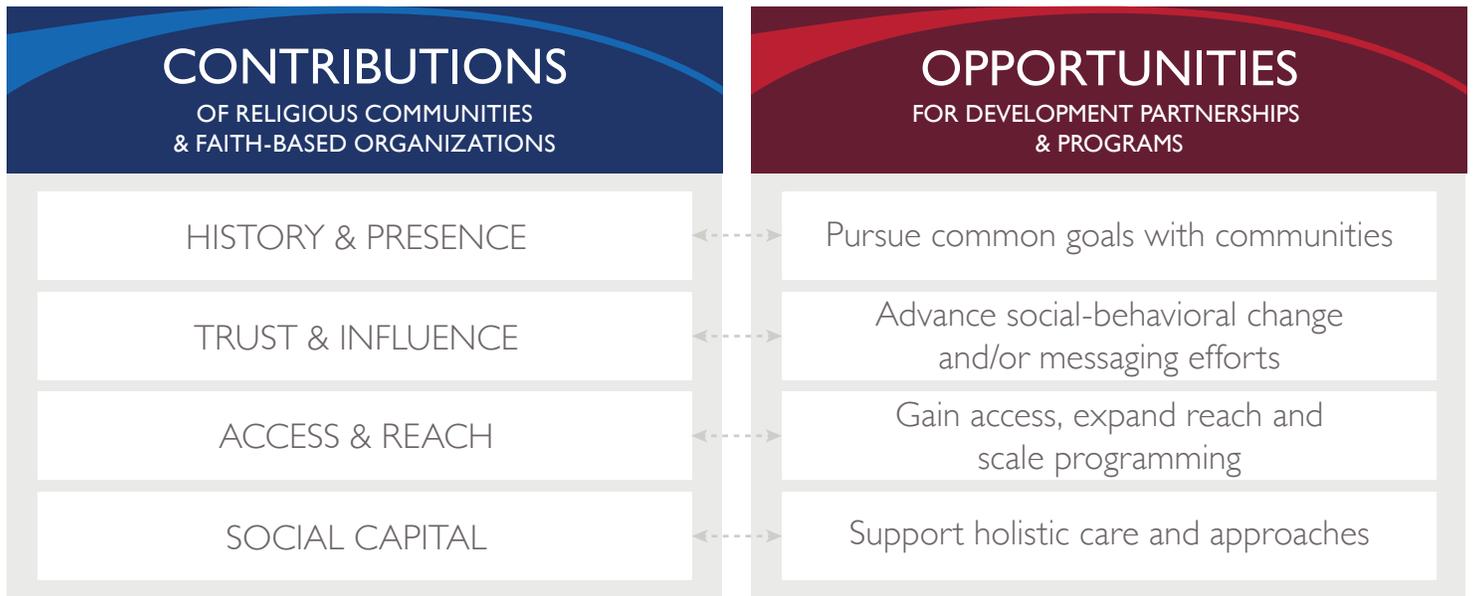
II. Opportunities, Barriers, and Evidence in Strategic Religious Engagement

“Strategic Religious Engagement is the process of collaborating and partnering with religious communities and/or faith-based organizations, both globally and locally, to advance shared development and humanitarian goals.”

DEFINING STRATEGIC RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

Strategic Religious Engagement (SRE) is the process of collaborating and partnering with religious communities and/or FBOs, both globally and locally,⁵ to advance shared development and humanitarian goals. It encompasses collaboration to establish new or sustain ongoing development initiatives and can take multiple forms. Ultimately, SRE is an adaptive approach to development and humanitarian assistance that can apply to any sector or region depending on the local context. This process of engagement is outlined in the framework in Section IV below.

SRE is most effective when it is built on partnerships that have been cultivated over time. One-time engagements to achieve short-term objectives might yield particular accomplishments, but risk becoming transactional in nature. Episodic encounters can instrumentalize our stakeholders, bring harm to communities, and jeopardize our reputation. Conversely, our engagement becomes strategic when we take intentional steps to safeguard against these risks, focus our collaboration on shared priorities with clear objectives, and cultivate deep partnerships that are built to last. SRE builds on USAID’s commitment to locally led and inclusive development by affirming the essential role religious actors play in their communities and aligning the Agency’s practices to elevate their distinct perspectives, expertise, and leadership through partnerships that drive development progress worldwide.



This is an illustrative set of contributions religious communities and faith-based organizations make in development, but is by no means an exhaustive list. A more detailed description of contributions can be found in the research insights below.

OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD BRIDGES IN DEVELOPMENT

Engagement of religious communities and partnership with FBOs to advance USG goals is a long-standing, well-established practice of the USG, as emphasized in the [2013 U.S. National Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement](#).⁶ Since the Agency's inception, USAID has successfully partnered with religious communities and FBOs by building on the distinct contributions these actors make in development and humanitarian assistance. These contributions, supported by research in the growing academic field of religion and development,⁷ offer opportunities to collaborate and maximize positive development outcomes.

There are examples of effective religious engagement across all development sectors, but one of the most impactful is the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Since the program began in 2003, the USG has invested more than \$100 billion in global HIV/AIDS response. PEPFAR-funded activities, often implemented in partnership with FBOs and community organizations, have saved 25 million lives, prevented millions of HIV infections, and accelerated progress toward stabilizing or decreasing the global HIV/AIDS pandemic in more than 50 countries. Recognizing the unique

position FBOs and religious communities hold in their nations, PEPFAR launched the Faith and Community Initiative in 2018, investing in FBOs and religious communities to address gaps in HIV epidemic control. This led to an increase in identifying cases, providing treatments and disseminating information in several nations.⁸ From global health to peacebuilding to environmental protection, religious actors play critical roles in improving outcomes and advancing progress due to the significant local knowledge, expertise, and trust they bring on any range of issues affecting their communities.⁹ In all these areas and beyond, collaborating with religious communities and FBOs emphasizes the potential of local actors across the development landscape and is an indispensable component of USAID's localization agenda, as described in the [Local Capacity Strengthening Policy](#).

BARRIERS TO STRATEGIC RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT IN DEVELOPMENT

Across the development landscape, there are perceived obstacles to including religious communities and FBOs as stakeholders in our development efforts. Overcoming these barriers is key both to building bridges with actors at the local level and strengthening an effective aid system. These barriers fall in three broad categories: misperceptions, myths, and mistrust.



Photo by USAID/Zimbabwe

Misperceptions: Internal workforce surveys conducted as part of USAID’s [Evidence Summit](#) on SRE identified multiple knowledge gaps and misperceptions regarding how SRE can be applied across the Agency. This policy addresses these misperceptions, and clarifies and consolidates existing guidance about working with religious communities and FBOs. For example, a perceived lack of Agency-specific guidance and resources on SRE has led some to believe that partnership with religious actors is either not permissible or too difficult in practice. The policy therefore provides evidence supporting the importance and benefits of these partnerships, including a set of principles facilitating their creation. Internal and external stakeholder consultations further indicated confusion related to programmatic application of the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause, as well as USAID’s regulations on working with religious communities and FBOs, which contribute to frustration, inefficiencies, and barriers in the partnership process. In response, the policy highlights key legal considerations in “BRIDGES Principles” (section III) and “Framework for Engagement” (section IV) that includes encouraging staff to consult early and often with General Counsel (GC) to discuss the vast range of permissible partnerships and engagement opportunities. Potential faith-based partners, particularly small and local organizations, are especially affected by

these misperceptions as they navigate the complex system of federal funding. When USAID staff are unclear on the parameters of partnership with religious communities and FBOs, partner relationships are jeopardized, potential partnerships are missed, and the Agency is less able to deliver on its commitments to inclusive development. The policy guides staff on how to address these identified concerns, including through training, resources, toolkits, and consultation with GC.

Myths: Development professionals may be unaware of the opportunities to work with religious communities and FBOs, mistakenly believing that these stakeholders have trouble aligning with USG interests, are solely interested in helping people of the same faith, or have limited capacity to execute effective programs or maintain standards on par with the international development community. Conversely, religious communities and FBOs may feel they need to hide their religious identity or compromise core values to be eligible for USG partnership. Similarly, development professionals may overestimate or underestimate the willingness of religious communities to engage, leading to unintended consequences that could cause adverse impacts. Reinforcing these myths attenuates the Agency’s relationship with communities of faith and fails to account for the positive impact of many

organizations working in development. Consulting the principles in this policy along with USAID's [Local Capacity Strengthening Policy Principles](#) will help staff recognize engagement opportunities while remaining sensitive to potential harms and mitigating risks associated with them.

Mistrust: Mistrust on the part of religious and government actors is another limit to effective engagement. Religious communities and FBOs can feel uncertain about USAID's role in local development efforts, commitment to shared values, and whether development efforts accord with their beliefs. They can also harbor concerns that SRE may result in the USG supporting proselytizing, excluding members of certain faiths or no faith, reinforcing religious divides, or promoting one religion over another. The aforementioned surveys found government actors may also be concerned that SRE could increase discrimination against vulnerable populations—including women and girls, marginalized ethnic and religious populations, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, at-risk youth, LGBTQI+ people, and other historically socially marginalized groups—or do harm by exposing minority communities to undue persecution because of increased USG attention. Resources including [WorkWithUSAID.org](#), [USAID's Nondiscrimination Policy](#), and [guidance](#) on Integrating Inclusive Development Across the Program Cycle detail the Agency's expectations for its staff and its implementing partners to safeguard against these concerns in all areas of work, including SRE.¹⁰

Promoting ongoing and open discussions about these concerns and expectations will reduce barriers to development and strengthen our ability to work locally with strategic partners in development. USAID's BRIDGES principles (Belonging, Respect, Integrity, Dignity, Growth, Equity, Sustainability) and framework for engagement, described in depth below, also outline the best ways to enhance such partnerships.

EVIDENCE OF STRATEGIC RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT IN DEVELOPMENT¹¹

Research evidence shows that effectively engaging religious communities and FBOs improves development outcomes. USAID's Evidence Summit on SRE assembled nearly 300 individuals from the global community, including policymakers, universities, nonprofits, and civil-society organizations representing a diverse range of traditions, expertise, and thought. Co-convened by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the United States Institute of Peace, and Templeton Religion Trust, the Summit examined the research evidence on the role and impact of religious communities and FBOs in development and humanitarian assistance and explored implications for USAID policy and practice. As part of the effort, USAID commissioned a [systematic literature review](#) that resulted in a set of key findings, identified knowledge gaps, and established a baseline against which future programming can be measured.



Photo by World Vision/USAID (Pacific Islands)

RESEARCH INSIGHTS:

CONTRIBUTIONS OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES & FBOs

HISTORY & PRESENCE: In many of the communities where USAID works, FBOs and religious communities have a presence that usually long predates that of development professionals. Recognizing this history, alongside the positive (and, at times, negative) roles played by these actors, is critical to building a baseline on which to conduct SRE to ensure sustainable impact once USAID interventions have concluded. Conversely, failing to recognize the historical contributions of religious actors undermines our long-term goals and compromises our ability to build enduring relationships with key partners in development.

TRUST & INFLUENCE: FBOs and religious communities can play key roles across international development sectors as authentic sources of moral and communal leadership. FBOs and religious communities can create safe spaces or networks, educating communities and shifting cultural and behavioral norms.

ACCESS & REACH: FBOs and religious communities maintain unique forms of relational, spiritual, and moral capital that are not available through other forms of human organization. FBOs and religious community engagements have had distinctive impacts on development outcomes based on holistic values-based approaches and their capacities to draw on wide networks.

SOCIAL CAPITAL: Social capital includes institutions, relationships, networks, norms, and values that govern interactions among people and contribute to economic and social development. FBOs and religious communities have various intertwined social networks that serve and protect people in fragile contexts and disasters. They link local, national, and international networks and can contribute to development outcomes at each level.





III. BRIDGES: Principles For Engagement

USAID’s SRE approach is guided by a set of principles that convey our commitment to strengthen bridge building in communities where we work. Individually, these principles represent a posture USAID staff can adopt to enhance positive engagement with religious actors. A framework to adopt these principles is detailed in Section IV of this policy. Collectively, they offer a foundation on which Missions and Bureaus or Independent Offices (B/IOs) can build long-term relationships with these key partners in development. USAID Operating Units are encouraged to adopt these principles by applying them in any interactions with religious communities and FBOs and integrating them in actions taken throughout the Program Cycle outlined in [ADS 201](#). Note that these

“A principled approach to Strategic Religious Engagement also reminds us that engagement is not an end unto itself; rather, it can provide a meaningful vehicle to enhance relationships with communities and support partnerships.”

principles of engagement align with, and complement, those in other USAID statements and policies, including USAID's [Values](#), the [Local Capacity Strengthening Policy](#), and the [Policy on Promoting the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#). This approach applies to all external partnerships but is uniquely responsive to the concerns articulated by religious communities and FBOs in evidence-based research commissioned by USAID.¹²

As the bedrock on which USAID endeavors to expand and enhance diverse partnerships, the seven principles below are designed to promote bridge-building, not gate-keeping, and aim to overcome the limitations outlined in Section II of this policy. A principled approach to SRE also reminds us that engagement is not an end unto itself; rather, it can provide a meaningful vehicle to enhance relationships with communities and support partnerships. Accordingly, the principles reflect the Agency's existing values and should be used to encourage staff to remain grounded in respect for our partners and the people we serve, committed to elevating local voices, drawing strength from diversity, and improving our relationships through consistent reflection and evaluation.

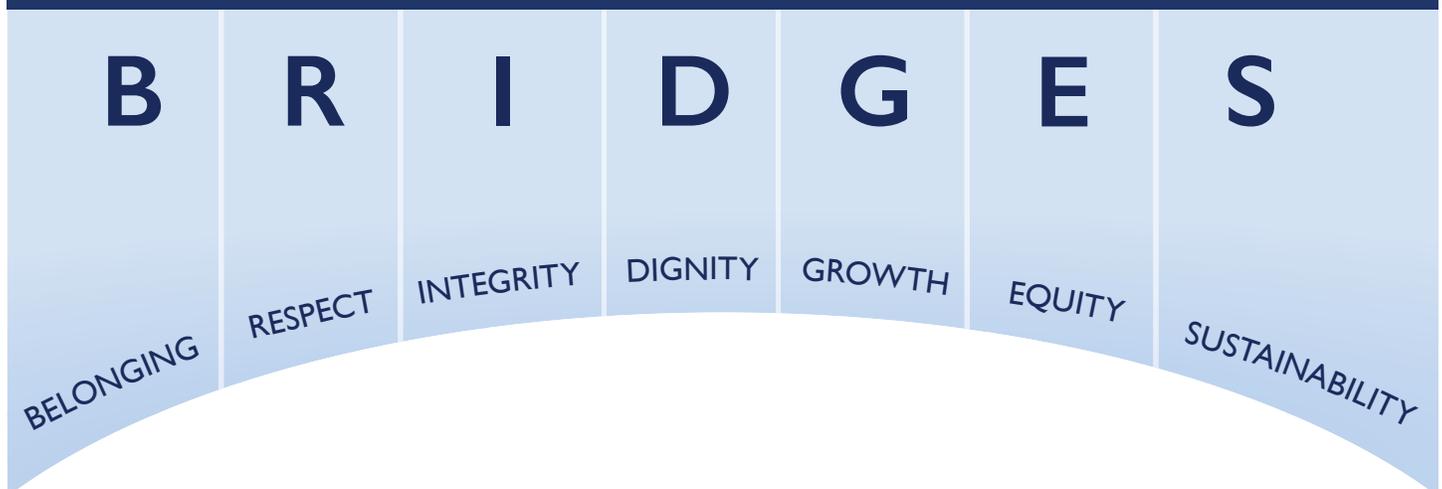
BELONGING: We will engage with a posture of inclusion, in ways that enhance diversity and promote pluralism. The protection of social belonging establishes an environment where respect and inclusion of diverse identities are defended and offers an antidote to oppression, stigma, marginalization, and polarization. Recognizing that religious dynamics can serve as levers of

unity as well as division, the principle of belonging aims to balance the respect for distinct worldviews with universal principles of human dignity and authentic relationships that span across communities. Pluralism is strengthened in instances where dignity and human rights are upheld so that people of all backgrounds, beliefs, and conscience can flourish – not in spite of profound differences, but because of their valued presence.¹³

In support of inclusive development and USAID's [Nondiscrimination Policy](#), this principle serves as a reminder that nondiscrimination is a critical foundation for protecting and promoting the human rights of all persons, ensuring equitable access to USAID programs to empower and effectively reach women and girls, historically marginalized ethnic and religious populations, Indigenous Peoples, internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, youth and elderly, LGBTQI+ people, and other socially marginalized groups. USAID does not accept discrimination, stigmatization, mistreatment, or harassment of its employees, partners, or recipients and considers human rights in its application of SRE. USAID's guidance on [Integrating Inclusive Development Across the Program Cycle](#) sets the standards for the Agency and its implementing partners to guard against these concerns and help projects address the needs of marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Adopting the principle of belonging in SRE is particularly important in countries where religiously motivated actions

USAID's SRE Policy is grounded by a set of principles that convey our commitment to strengthen bridge building in communities where we work.





or dynamics have attenuated communities' social fabric or have been perceived as sources of conflict. USAID encourages approaches that welcome new partners in development and promote pluralism and inclusion. We do this by promoting positive relations between local actors and USG officials, being mindful of the local contexts and cultures in which we operate and identifying partners committed to strengthening peace and stability. In humanitarian contexts we deliver assistance based on need, in keeping with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

RESPECT: We will respect the autonomy and unique identity of individuals and groups with whom we engage. A critical component of successful engagement entails respecting the history, autonomy, character, and independence of the religious communities and FBOs we engage, including the cultural and religious values that motivate their work. This includes acknowledging the complexity of religious landscapes in countries where USAID works, appreciating the differences between and among religious traditions of those with whom we work, recognizing their distinct approaches to development, and respecting their unique identity. In most countries where USAID

operates, the humanitarian work of religious communities stretches back centuries, predating USAID's presence. As such, they should be consulted as key stakeholders within communities where we work, regardless of whether they have a formal role in programs we fund or manage. This consultation and engagement with religious communities in humanitarian contexts must be grounded in the aforementioned universal humanitarian principles. Particularly in places where religion plays a normative role in shaping societies and culture, recognizing the histories of religious communities, honoring the positive contributions they have already made, and seeking to understand their perspectives will go a long way toward cultivating meaningful dialogue and relationships to achieve shared goals.

INTEGRITY: We will seek to build relationships formed with integrity, engaging ethically and in a manner consistent with U.S. constitutional guarantees. Consultations with religious communities and FBOs highlight the need for both governments and the donor community to resist instrumentalizing these partners to meet their own objectives. Once established, that approach is difficult to unlearn, may persist for years, and can reinforce patterns of exploitation in the very communities

USAID seeks to empower. By contrast, embracing integrity promotes two-way engagement; it seeks to build trust and mutual understanding prior to undertaking initiatives. Upholding integrity in our actions also means that we commit to engaging communities in line with all applicable legal and policy requirements, including both the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment. While the ultimate goal of SRE is to maximize development results and expand our approach to locally led development, approaching SRE from a posture of integrity, along with the rest of the principles, creates the even-handedness and transparency necessary to sustain relationships that support those results over time.

DIGNITY: We will uphold the worth of all people in all we do. We will partner with organizations that share common ground in defending the dignity of all people. As we

consider the impact of foreign assistance on the individuals and communities with whom we engage, we will recognize that affiliation with the USG has the potential to bolster or undermine the legitimacy of religious communities and FBOs, depending on the circumstances. Bearing this in mind, we will embrace the tenet of “do no harm” as central to our efforts, carefully considering at the outset—and on an ongoing basis—the potential unintended consequences of our proximity to external partners. Similarly, in humanitarian contexts, we will respect and uphold the humanitarian principles. When appropriate, such as in nonpermissive environments where religious communities may face heightened risks, USAID staff is encouraged to tailor their approach to use ‘do no harm’ principles to reduce the risk of possible harm to partners, communities, activities, and U.S. investments while still furthering mutual development goals and continuing to protect dignity.



GROWTH: We will approach communities humbly and eager to learn, incorporating evidence-based practices and lessons learned in our engagements.

As highlighted in USAID's localization efforts and locally led development practices, local leadership is critical to sustained development progress. By intentionally including local and diverse voices, USAID can recognize and shift power imbalances. Embracing the spirit of "Nothing about us, without us,"¹⁴ religious actors are key agents of change in their communities, and USAID's engagement of them is critical not only to sustain development progress, but also to provide chances to learn and do more. Accordingly, USAID will promote opportunities for mutual understanding and learning, employing Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) tools to identify and apply lessons learned. In the same way, staff is encouraged to consult established research on the role of religious engagement in development, particularly those conducted by local researchers and/or in local languages, to identify emerging research relevant to the geographic region¹⁵ and/or sector where they work. Operating Units are also encouraged to invest in opportunities that expand the knowledge base of socio-cultural and religious contexts as part of program design and implementation and to identify ways to apply lessons learned in new activities.

EQUITY: We are committed to enhancing inclusion and equity to benefit the communities we serve.

USAID supports equity in our work to transform communities and countries so people can thrive and prosper. Our commitment to advancing this principle translates to broad outreach in our engagement within local communities, fairness in our interactions with the individuals in those communities, and even-handedness in our selection of the institutions with whom we work. We recognize that attention to equity among our people, partners, and programs is critical to promoting a positive environment for engagement. Consequently, we remain committed to upholding fairness in our partner selection processes, upholding constitutional guarantees, and ensuring that communities and organizations are neither favored nor discriminated against based on their religious affiliation or lack thereof.

SUSTAINABILITY: We will aim to build long-term, enduring partnerships with religious communities.

We will initiate and support long-term relationships with religious communities and FBOs through community-level engagement, solution-driven dialogue, and in-country collaboration to strengthen shared development goals. This principle includes working to lower barriers where possible to support sustained partner diversification at the local level. It also recognizes the benefit of identifying dedicated points of contact in USAID Missions responsible for outreach with these distinct stakeholders and establishing clear transition plans for associated duties, as POCs may rotate among posts across years and Administrations. Finally, insofar as the universal influence of religion is present and continues to shape societies around the world, it is essential for USAID to continue deepening our understanding of religion's influence and impact on development outcomes.



Photo by Hanz Rippe for USAID/Colombia

IV. Building Bridges in Development: A Framework for Engagement

This policy offers a framework for USAID staff to work directly with religious communities and FBOs via a principled, evidence-based approach to engagement. This four-step model outlines the process for putting SRE into practice by identifying what steps can be undertaken to invest in engagement at a local level and where staff can implement these steps relative to existing Agency guidance.



SURVEY THE LANDSCAPE



SET THE FOUNDATION



BUILD TOGETHER



MAINTAIN & REPAIR



SURVEY THE LANDSCAPE

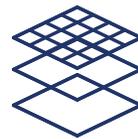
Engagement with religious communities begins with seeking to understand local context.

Surveying the landscape is an opportunity for USAID staff to assess a country's religious landscape, as well as the options for strategic engagement within it. While the Agency maintains general standards and principles¹⁶ that inform USAID's approach to development, these have not historically addressed SRE considerations for engaging communities. Though comprehensive religious landscape surveys and analyses are complex and time-consuming, staff can leverage the Agency's existing tools as a first step to integrating SRE into Agency processes. For example, considering the religious landscape of a country within a political economy analysis, geographic approach, or civil-society assessment enables USAID to implement better, more effective programming by helping staff understand the surrounding culture and context of the places where we work.

Religious dynamics vary considerably from country to country, as well as within countries and communities. International and interreligious networks may also connect religious communities and FBOs across national borders and religious traditions, pioneering nontraditional opportunities and leveraging resources in service of development progress. These factors illustrate why there is no one-size-fits-all approach to SRE and highlight the importance of surveying the landscape. Whether these considerations are integrated into existing assessments or are conducted independently, USAID staff are encouraged to assess the general and specific country context; reflect on how key principles of engagement might be applied in that context; and develop a context-linked assessment/engagement plan inclusive of the diverse communities identified during the analysis. Throughout these stages of review, and in line with existing USAID guidance,¹⁷ staff should pay particular attention to the operating environment of the host government and how its structure, constitutions/laws, and norms affect the relationship between the host government and religious communities along the humanitarian-development spectrum.

Incorporating SRE as part of the basic constituent elements of USAID country engagement, alongside outreach with other key stakeholders,¹⁸ will serve as a foundation for

building understanding and trust while identifying possible areas of collaboration. USAID staff should also be mindful of opportunities to collaborate with other U.S. departments and agencies, when and where appropriate, to ensure country-level engagement of religious actors is well-coordinated across the USG. Identifying SRE as a cross-cutting theme will also enable Mission staff to enhance partner diversification and maximize development outcomes when creating a Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS), initiating Project or Activity Design, or executing other strategic planning processes.



SET THE FOUNDATION

This step lays the groundwork for the USAID workforce to engage directly with religious communities and FBOs. It also recognizes that the Agency must make investments to develop the technical capacity of USAID Operating Units through evidence-based training and resources to carry out the approaches to engagement, partnership, and safeguarding outlined in this policy. Effective SRE is first built on USG legal guidance, which dictates the parameters of SRE in countries where we work.



Photo by USAID Middle East/
Association Mimouna (Morocco)



Photo by Adam Phillips/USAID (Kenya)

USAID conducts all programs and outreach in accordance with the First Amendment religion clauses. USAID funds may not be used to finance explicitly religious activities such as worship, religious instruction, or proselytization, and neither USAID nor its implementing partners may favor or disfavor partners or recipients based on their religious identity or affiliation, or lack thereof.*

USAID's Strategic Religious Engagement, International Religious Freedom, and Establishment Clause trainings, available to all staff, reinforce this legal foundation by equipping the workforce with requisite knowledge and skills to partner confidently with religious communities and FBOs. These courses also outline common key terms, concepts, and approaches in religious literacy that aim to provide consistency in our engagement across Bureaus and Missions, while building staff confidence and promoting compliance with the rules and regulations outlined above. Bureaus and Missions are further encouraged to consult with their GC/ Resident Legal Officer (RLO) early and often during activity design to better ensure that designs are consistent with the First Amendment.

This stage of the Bridge Building Framework also serves as a reminder for USAID staff to review the BRIDGES principles. Along with USAID's Values and the [Local Capacity Strengthening Policy Principles](#), these standards help direct

*For additional consideration when working at the intersection of faith and development and humanitarian response, please consult the following resources: USAID's [Rule on the Participation of Faith-Based Organizations](#) in USAID Programs at 22 CFR 205.1, in [ADS 303.3.28](#), and in various Mandatory Standard Provisions for U.S. NGOs ([ADS 303maa](#)), Non-US NGOs ([ADS 303mab](#)), and Fixed Amount Awards ([ADS 303mat](#)).

our efforts as part of a holistic and strategic approach to building long-term enduring relationships with key partners in development.



BUILD TOGETHER

The framework for building development interventions together with religious communities and FBOs can apply across USAID's work in multiple sectors and geographies. Additionally, there are operational steps and considerations that support a deliberate approach, rather than an ad hoc one, to SRE. Inviting religious actors into stakeholder consultations, identifying shared goals with them, and integrating engagement opportunities across the Program Cycle and beyond are some of the steps Bureaus and Missions can take to establish relationships that are built to last.

Even in instances where standalone SRE programming does not exist, there are still opportunities for specific investments to advance engagement with or understanding of religious actors. These include commissioning research from local experts and institutions on particular elements of the religious environment that may affect programming or conducting broader analyses that include consideration of religious dynamics. The investments might also include hiring staff in the short or long term, who may bring academic expertise, practitioner experience, or evidence-informed perspectives to programming. These tactics all serve to promote more effective SRE approaches, which can be translated into improved development outcomes and sustainable results.

As a complementary approach to our localization and broader development agenda, SRE will most commonly be applied as a cross-cutting function in USAID's established processes and procedures. Points of integration include strategic planning, activity design, acquisition and assistance implementation, and performance management planning that govern how we organize ourselves to prioritize interventions and invest taxpayer funds in programming for our desired development outcomes. At times, these relationships may be formalized through a variety of award types, including grants and contracts. Empowering local actors and sharing

ownership of a project in partnership enhances sustainability and results, so incorporating input and feedback before, during, and after the launch of a project is essential to build new bridges and strengthen partnerships.



MAINTAIN & REPAIR

As with all of USAID's approaches for building sustainable solutions to development challenges, SRE requires continuous engagement with our partners to ensure we are achieving development progress. In line with ADS 201, we will seek regular feedback to maintain and build our strategic alliances or adjust interventions as needed. USAID's Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) Toolkit outlines adaptive management approaches that can be adopted to course correct in response to a change in circumstance or information.¹⁹

So that partnerships are properly maintained, USAID should communicate to its partners that we endeavor to build enduring relationships based on identified shared priorities, not merely create short-term ad hoc transactional interactions. By approaching partnerships with the BRIDGES principles in mind, we will indicate our desire to fill knowledge gaps while providing partners with opportunities to request course corrections needed to enhance the mutual success of USAID, partners, and project recipients alike. This adaptive-management approach allows a Mission or implementing partner the flexibility to change an intervention if religious communities and FBOs are not being reached or are experiencing negative and/or unintended consequences.

V. Conclusion

USAID engages as a development actor in a contemporary world of increasing complexity, change, and challenge. As USAID builds partnerships at the local level, *Building Bridges in Development: USAID's Strategic Religious Engagement Policy* provides staff with new knowledge and skills to guide their engagement with these key development actors. In alignment with USAID's approach to localization, this policy builds on past efforts and lessons learned to identify the best new approaches to strengthen our partnerships wherever we work. The principles outlined in this policy and the corresponding operational framework will assist Operating Units in pursuing work that safeguards against risks, while focusing on cultivating partnerships and development results that are built to last.

This document is the first USAID policy to address the role of religious communities and FBOs as essential partners in development and humanitarian assistance. It represents a commitment on behalf of USAID to engage directly on shared development priorities. With ever-evolving challenges, from environmental disasters to global pandemics to rising authoritarianism, building bridges with religious communities and FBOs is key to achieving USAID's goal of advancing a free, peaceful, and prosperous world.

“With ever evolving challenges, from environmental disasters to global pandemics to rising authoritarianism, building bridges with religious communities and faith-based organizations is key to achieving USAID's goal of advancing a free, peaceful, and prosperous world.”

VI. Glossary²⁰

Culture: The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time.

Faith-based Organizations (FBOs): A type of institution that is driven, motivated, or guided in part by religious, spiritual, or faith-based consideration.

Implementing Partner: An organization or individual with which/whom the Agency collaborates to achieve mutually agreed upon objectives and to secure participation of ultimate customers. Partners include host-country governments, private voluntary organizations, Indigenous and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), universities, other USG agencies and departments, the United Nations and other multilateral organizations, professional and business associations, and private businesses and individuals.²¹

Inclusive Development: An equitable development approach built on the understanding that every individual and community, of all diverse identities and experiences, is instrumental in the transformation of their own societies. Their engagement throughout the development process leads to better outcomes.

Instrumentalization: Treating a person or an organization as an instrument or as means to achieve some other goal.

Interreligious or Interfaith Organizations: An organization that encourages dialogue and cooperation among the world's different religions.

Historically Marginalized Groups: Populations including but not limited to, women, youth, children in adversity and their families, older persons, persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+ people, displaced persons, migrants, Indigenous Peoples and communities, non-dominant religious groups, non-dominant racial and ethnic groups, people in lower castes, and persons with unmet mental health needs.

New Partner: An individual or organization that has not received any funding from USAID as a prime partner over the last five years.

Partnership: An association between USAID, its partners, and customers based on mutual respect, complementary strengths, and shared commitment to achieve mutually agreed upon objectives.²²

Pluralism: A state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain and develop their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization.

Religion: A person's relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine, or worthy of especial reverence. Also a particular system of faith and worship.

Religious Actors: Any leader or individual, including women, youth, marginalized, and/or minority figures with influence in their communities, who overtly and systematically operates under declared religious principles.

Religious Community: Gatherings of people, locally or globally, who have common religious beliefs, habits, practices, and ideologies. These can include those at the individual level, such as people in leadership and in the community, and at the institutional level, such as houses of worship, congregations, associations, and networks.

Religious Freedom: Per the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

Stakeholders: Those affected positively or negatively by a development outcome or have an interest in or can influence a development outcome.²³

Strategic Religious Engagement: The process of collaborating with religious communities and/or partnering with faith-based organizations, both globally and locally, to advance shared development and humanitarian goals. It encompasses collaboration to establish new or sustain ongoing development initiatives and can take multiple forms. SRE is an adaptive approach to development and humanitarian assistance that can apply to any sector or region depending on the local context, and it is most effective when it is built on partnerships that have been cultivated over time.

Endnotes

1. As outlined in the [ADS 200](#), policies provide guidance regarding the purpose, content, and substance of USAID programs to be followed by implementation plans and actions.
2. Acknowledging these frameworks could change over time, this currently includes the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses in the First Amendment of the United States' Constitution and USAID's Rule on Participation of Religious Organizations in USAID Programs at 22 CFR 205.1. Additional USG Policies and legislation that encourage engaging religious actors and communities in U.S. foreign affairs include: the 1998 and 2016 International Religious Freedom Acts, the 2013 U.S. National Strategy on Integrating Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement into U.S. Foreign Policy.
3. Strategic Religious Engagement (SRE) is the process of collaborating with religious communities and/or partnering with faith-based organizations, both globally and locally, to advance shared development goals.
4. The evidence refers to the USAID-funded research [investments](#) following the [Evidence Summit](#) on Strategic Religious Engagement. The papers represent the first ever systematic review of evidence-based research commissioned by USAID on the role and contributions religious communities and FBOs make on development and humanitarian assistance.
5. These include but are not limited to: local religious communities, including Indigenous populations and traditions; faith-based organizations, ranging from local, regional, national and international; informal and formal transnational networks; as well as multi-faith and interfaith councils and associations representing individuals of all faiths and no particular faith, and responding to development and humanitarian assistance needs in specific geographic regions as well as across regions and continents.
6. The Strategy calls upon USG agencies to build internal capacity and institutionalize our work with religious communities through Agency-specific guidance and training.
7. These findings are products of the USAID-funded research [investments](#) following the [Evidence Summit](#) on Strategic Religious Engagement. The papers represent the first ever systematic review of evidence-based research commissioned by USAID on the role and contributions religious communities and FBOs make on development and humanitarian assistance.
8. Department of State, PEPFAR Fact Sheet: [Faith and Community Initiative](#)
9. USAID: "[Interreligious Foundations For Social Cohesion: The Central African Republic Interfaith Peacebuilding Partnership \(CIPP\)](#)"; USAID: "[Working With Faith Communities To Prevent Gender-Based Violence](#)"; USAID: "[Working With Local Influencers On Family Planning: World Vision International Integrated Birth Spacing Project](#)"; USAID: "[Community Leaders As Agents Of Change For Child Health: World Relief 'Tangiraneza/Start Well' Innovation Child Survival Project](#)"; USAID: "[Faith-Based and Community Engagement Impact Stories Part II](#)"
10. See [endnote 2](#).
11. These findings are products of the USAID-funded research investments following the [Evidence Summit](#) on Strategic Religious Engagement. [The papers](#) represent the first ever USAID funded systematic review of evidence-based research on the role and contributions religious communities and FBOs make on development and humanitarian assistance and included the conclusions of USAID's Evidence Summit. Furthermore, these findings are by no means exhaustive as other contributions include previous USAID co-hosted [conferences](#), volunteers, private forms of funding, and more.
12. Katherine Marshall (2021) Impressions & Indications of Religious Engagement in Development, The Review of Faith & International Affairs, 19:sup 1, 12-30: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/15570274.2021.1983358?needAccess=true>
13. This is reflected in the relationship between Strategic Religious Engagement and Religious Freedom. While IRF programming focuses on ending the violation of the right to religious beliefs and practices perpetrated by both state and non-state actors, SRE is intended to improve development outcomes across multiple sectors, one of which includes the objective of promoting international religious freedom as a fundamental human right. The relationship between the two is mutually reinforcing: religious freedom enables religious engagement; religious engagement promotes religious freedom.
14. An organizing principle borrowed from disability rights advocates and used by champions of localization efforts at USAID and beyond.
15. USAID's forthcoming Geospatial Strategy will apply a geographic approach to development, ensuring religious, economic, political, environmental, and cultural factors that interact and influence a given place are accounted for in strategic planning and program design.

16. Including the USAID [Leadership Philosophy](#) and [Mission, Vision And Values](#).
17. Such considerations support USAID's [Local Systems: A Framework For Supporting Sustained Development](#) and [The 5Rs Framework in the Program Cycle](#).
18. These include national and local governments; government service providers; private sector actors; civic advocacy groups; professional syndicates; vulnerable populations, including but not limited to women and girls, marginalized ethnic and religious populations, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, at-risk youth, LGBTQI+ people; and educational institutions.
19. We will seek feedback in accordance with [ADS Chapter 201: Program Cycle Operational Policy](#) and apply corrections as required by USAID's [Adaptive Management](#) framework.
20. The following words and phrases are used throughout the policy to encompass Strategic Religious Engagement at USAID. The definitions provided are not authoritative, but rather used to explain how USAID considers them in this policy and in our work.
21. [ADS Glossary](#)
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.



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