



Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

Strengthening freedom of religion or belief

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Why is freedom of religion or belief so important?

Freedom of religion or belief is an inalienable fundamental right. It is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and in the German Basic Law. This human right is about people's freedom to choose or to change their religion or belief, to manifest it and to live their life accordingly. For me, there is hardly anything that is more important than freedom of thought and freedom of conscience – and our actions in accordance with those freedoms. Freedom of religion or belief can never be seen in isolation from other human rights. On the contrary, the only way it can be envisaged and lived is in combination with them.



It is always a question of our identity and of respect in the way we interact with one another. As Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief, I want to place this topic at the centre of society, both here in Germany and worldwide.

What are the threats to freedom of religion or belief?

Unfortunately, this basic right is being threatened from many sides. Autocratic countries and one-party systems in places like China or North Korea are threatening freedom of religion or belief with their totalitarian control of society. Religious nationalism, such as we are seeing it in India, for example, also contradicts freedom of religion. The same applies when a state considers itself to be the executive body of a divine right, as reflected for example in the way religious minorities or dissidents are treated in Saudi Arabia or Iran. Hardly any other human right is twisted and misused as much as freedom of religion. And the extent of the threat to this basic right is illustrated by this figure: only three per cent of all people worldwide are able to express their beliefs freely and openly, lead their lives accordingly and assemble in expression of those beliefs. Freedom of religion or belief is an issue where there is a lot to do. We are still a very long way away from realising this right worldwide. That is why it is important that Germany has a representative for freedom of religion or belief. There is much to be done – and the effort is worth it.

What do I want to achieve?

In my international work, I will continue to promote the traditional, human rights-based approach to freedom of religion or belief and, as Federal Government Commissioner, will take a critical look at the situation in many countries worldwide and support the people affected. In addition, I intend to make the following two priorities a focus of my work in the next few years:

The potential of religions

First of all, my focus here is on the potential of religions and beliefs to contribute to ecologically, economically, socially and culturally sustainable global development in the spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. Faith and belief communities are making important contributions to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I want to work with these communities to make their efforts more visible and help to expand them.

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Religious freedom of indigenous peoples

This connects with my second priority: I want to make the religious freedom of indigenous peoples a special focus of my work. Fundamental rights of indigenous people are still not being fully recognised. Did you know that nature is often most intact in areas where indigenous peoples live? This is a result of the cosmovision and spirituality of these communities. And yet indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by persecution, killings, land grabbing, displacement, poverty, slash-and-burn cultivation for global markets, or aggressive missionary activities that violate human rights. We must not accept this.

So what does that mean in practice?

Religion and beliefs can make a decisive contribution to a decent life and the sustainable management of the natural environment. Let me give you some concrete examples to illustrate this: Jordan is one of the most arid countries in the world. Climate change, population growth, the economic situation and the large number of refugees from the Palestinian territories and Syria are putting pressure on the country's scarce water resources. In order to raise awareness of resource-conserving water use, imams and preachers are being trained as water ambassadors. In Mali, religious authorities were given training on eliminating female genital mutilation in a pilot project. More than 370 girls could be saved from FGM in this way. On my travels, I regularly have the opportunity to talk to representatives of indigenous communities.

The situation in Latin America will be a focus of my work in the next few years. It is also a question of reminding German companies to respect the rights of indigenous peoples. That is why we need a supply chain law that directly holds companies accountable for human rights violations and environmental violations. It is often indigenous areas that are affected by dam projects, the destruction of forests or the exploitation of resources. I am therefore pushing for a strong national and European supply chain law so that indigenous peoples are able to take direct legal action when their rights are being violated. In autumn of 2023 I will present the German government's report on the situation regarding worldwide freedom of religion or belief. I am grateful for all the support I can get in this endeavour.



For more information (in German) and contact details, go to:
religionsfreiheit.bmz.de