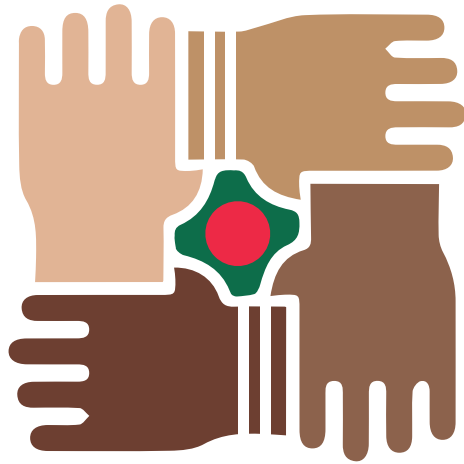


# HARMONY

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## About the Programme

The Agents of Change: A Bangladesh Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Initiative project aims to increase the number of people's understanding and accessing their right to freedom of religion or belief by reducing the level of discrimination against and societal hostility towards individuals on the grounds of their religion, belief, or faith. This is achieved through fostering leadership, empowering youth, strengthening networks, promoting inclusion, and enhancing the capacity of key stakeholders.

Implemented by the Hunger Project Bangladesh with support of the Church of England and the UK Government, the Agents of Change project works in eight districts of Bangladesh: Barisal, Chattogram, Cox's Bazar, Dhaka, Naogaon, Rangpur, Satkhira and Sunamganj. There are four main interlocutor groups: youth, faith leaders, community leaders and local-level CSO FoRB practitioners. The project supports capacity building of young people, and influences faith and community leaders to advocate successfully for greater FoRB for all at local and policy level. It also aims to build the capacity of civil society actors on FoRB action. The project's multi-pronged approach allows for a wide-lens perspective, dialogue and action on FoRB issues of local as well as national significance.

This project builds on the previous Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Network (FoRBLN) project's achievements and learnings through targeted interventions to broaden and deepen the Bangladesh FoRB leadership network and its work programme of engagement and network-building.

## Barisal's Quick Response Team: Humanitarian Leadership in Times of Crisis

In Barisal, the Youth Ending Hunger Social Harmony Unit, Root In, was formed by members who had participated in the Youth Leadership Development Training. This training was conducted under the Agents of Change: A Bangladesh Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Initiative, implemented by The Hunger Project Bangladesh with support from the Church of England and the UK Government. The three-day training brought about a deep transformation in the volunteers' mindset, strengthening their commitment to promoting religious harmony, tolerance, and peace in society. They learned how to take the initiative in times of crisis and lead efforts for positive change.

### A Call to Action

August 6, 2024 was an otherwise quiet evening amidst political turmoil. Mehrab Ahmed Joy, the coordinator of Barisal's Root In Social Harmony Unit, called Hadiuzzaman, the National Joint Coordinator of Youth Ending Hunger.

"The country is in turmoil, and violence is spreading in Barisal as well. Should we just sit back and watch? We've been trained for this. We need to act," Joy said.

Hadiuzzaman paused for a moment and replied, "You're right, but we need to ensure the safety of our volunteers while taking action. Form a team with those who are willing to work."

### The Birth of the Quick Response Team

On August 7, Mehrab called a meeting with his unit members. They decided to form a Quick Response Team (QRT). Addressing the team, Mehrab said, "The training we received was not just for learning - it's time to put it into practice. We cannot afford to sit idle."

The FoRB program had instilled one fundamental belief in them: if you want to bring change, you must take the initiative. Under the mentorship of National Joint Coordinator Hadiuzzaman, the Barisal Quick Response Team was swiftly formed. The six-member team took on the responsibility of assisting religious minorities in times of crisis, maintaining communal harmony, and preventing looting.

### Immediate Action

Once the team was formed, they got to work immediately. To spread a strong message, they designed digital posters with the slogan: "We are by your side. Choose harmony, not violence." The posters were widely circulated on social media. Within a single day, the message reached over 3,000 people, and calls for help started pouring in from different parts of Barisal.

The first call came from an area where a group of miscreants was threatening a minority family. Upon receiving the news, the Quick Response Team immediately informed the local army unit and rushed to the spot on motorcycles. Their presence, combined with local support and the strategic skills they had learned in training, successfully prevented the attack and ensured the family's safety.

Then, one after another, 21 calls came in - 17 from within Barisal and four from neighbouring districts. The Quick Response Team swiftly responded to each case. With the support of the army and local residents, they successfully intervened in 18 incidents, preventing communal violence, looting, and attempts at sabotage against government establishments.

### A Tragic Setback

However, not every incident could be prevented. In one case, by the time the team arrived, the attackers had already grievously injured a man, severing his limbs. This tragic event left the team in deep sorrow. But their grief only strengthened their resolve - they vowed to prevent such atrocities from happening again.

### Expanding the Initiative

The efforts of the Quick Response Team did not remain confined to Barisal alone. Their actions also inspired students at Barisal University. Eighteen volunteer organisations from the university joined forces with the Root In social harmony unit. Together, they issued a collective call to action:

"Stand against attacks on minorities and the destruction of public property across the country."

Through the leadership skills, conflict resolution training, and social harmony education imparted by the ForB program under The Hunger Project Bangladesh, the youth of Barisal not only gained the courage to act but also ensured the sustainability of their initiative.

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The Hunger Project Bangladesh  
প্রচারেঃ ইয়ুথ এন্ডিং হাসার বরিশাল  
ROOT IN BANGLADESH

## The Power of Harmony



Rudra Pal (pseudonym) is a third-year undergraduate student at Satkhira Government College. His hometown is in Dumuria Upazila, Khulna. For his studies, he resides in a hostel in Satkhira. Since his first year of university, he has been actively involved with the volunteer organization Youth Ending Hunger Bangladesh. Through social media, he maintained regular contact with many friends, including a Muslim girl he affectionately called Didi Bhai (elder sister). Their relationship was built on pure friendship and mutual respect.

However, at the beginning of 2024, a vicious rumor spread about this innocent friendship. It was falsely alleged that Rudra was trapping Muslim girls in romantic relationships to convert them to Hinduism. Even more malicious accusations, including baseless claims of physical relations, began circulating on social media. This false propaganda deeply distressed both Rudra and his Muslim friend. Living far from his family and friends, Rudra felt unsafe and emotionally shattered.

Although the initial bout of the rumors had gradually begun to subside, the situation worsened after a major political upheaval on August 5, 2024, when a mass student uprising led to the fall of the autocratic government and the escape of prime minister Sheikh Hasina. The country's law and order situation deteriorated, and amidst this political instability, the false propaganda against Rudra surged again with even greater intensity. This time, the accusations escalated fast, claiming that Rudra was not only converting Muslim girls but was part of a larger conspiracy. As a result, people around him started looking at him with suspicion. But this time, Rudra did not lose his way.

By then, he had already participated in the Youth Leadership Training under the Agents of Change: A Bangladesh Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Initiative, implemented by The Hunger Project Bangladesh with the support of the Church of England and the UK government. This three-day training was a turning point in his life. He learned how to transform crises into strengths and take on the responsibility of being a social harmony ambassador.

Following the training, Rudra and his fellow activists established Social Harmony Units. Through these units, they conducted awareness campaigns, organised workshops, and worked to educate people on the importance of religious tolerance and social harmony. They recognised that maintaining peace in society required a shift in mindset. To make their initiative more impactful, they engaged political leaders, prominent personalities, religious leaders, teachers, journalists, and representatives of civil society.

The training, along with his subsequent experiences, gave Rudra the courage to confront the ongoing smear campaign against him. He reached out to Samapti Gain Setu, the Satkhira District Coordinator of Youth Ending Hunger. Samapti listened to him attentively, advised him to stay calm, and suggested filing a General Diary (GD) at the police station. She assured him that the entire unit would stand by his side.

Summoning his courage, Rudra went to file a GD. Accompanying him was Inamul Hossain, a previous batch participant of the Youth Leadership Training and the coordinator of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement in Satkhira district. With Inamul's support, Rudra learned effective strategies to counter disinformation. Through legal action and the collective efforts of volunteer youth, Rudra successfully defended himself against the false accusations, preventing a potential disaster.

Rudra's bravery became an inspiration not just for himself but for the young people in his community. In his own words, "The FoRB training conducted by The Hunger Project not only taught me how to handle crises but also showed me how to spread the message of harmony. With the right guidance, any crisis can be transformed into the strength of social harmony."

Rudra's story teaches us that even in the darkest of times, there is a light of hope. With courage, compassion, and proper guidance, it is possible to overcome divisions and build bridges of harmony in society.

## Harmony in Paint by the Youth



A new journey of harmony had begun in Satkhira under the Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Network (FoRBLN) Project - supported by the Church of England and the UK Government. The young volunteers of Youth Ending Hunger realised that one of the most effective ways to overcome religious or ethnic divisions and intolerance was to establish close connections with everyone. They believed that by engaging with people from different backgrounds, they could play a significant role in fostering interfaith harmony. With this in mind, they decided to spread the message of peace not just through words but also through meaningful actions.

These young changemakers from Satkhira participated in a Youth Leadership Training which focused on social cohesion, working with local communities, protecting diversity, and leadership development.

### **A Youth-led Initiative for Social Harmony**

As part of their efforts to promote interfaith unity, the young volunteers established four Social Harmony Units across the district. Under the Agents of Change: A Bangladesh Freedom or Religion or Belief Leadership Initiative project, they launched awareness campaigns, organised workshops, and conducted outreach activities to encourage changes in social attitudes. Their goal was to uphold religious freedom and create a bond of harmony in the community. This vision led to a unique initiative,- painting traditional alpana (decorative artwork) at a Catholic church during Christmas to spread the message of unity.

On the evening of December 22, 2024, the volunteers of Youth Ending Hunger were engaged in a lively discussion when one of them proposed, "Why don't we organise something special at the Catholic church for Christmas on December 25?" The idea immediately resonated with

everyone. They quickly devised a plan to clean the church premises, create colourful alpana paintings, and organise a public pledge campaign to promote harmony.

The first step was to seek permission. They contacted Henry Sardar, a respected leader of the Catholic church, who was overjoyed by the proposal. Shortly afterward, he confirmed approval from the church authorities, saying, "You may proceed with your plans. The Father has been informed."

### **A Day of Action for Peace and Unity**

The very next morning, on December 23, ten Youth Ending Hunger members - Keya, Samapti, Ruma, Mushfiq, Amit, Taposh, Hridoy, Imran, Jerin, and Utpal - arrived at the Catholic church. They first met Father Noren J Baidya and shared their detailed plan. The Father warmly welcomed them and encouraged their initiative.

The first task was cleaning the church courtyard. The volunteers swept the premises, removed debris, and washed the area with water. One member was sent to buy paints and brushes with assistance from Sister Sonali Dofadar, while the rest remained engaged in cleaning. This activity was not just about beautifying a physical space - it symbolised their commitment to creating a more inclusive and harmonious society.

By noon, the courtyard was spotless, and the alpana painting began. The volunteers first sketched the designs with chalk before bringing them to life with vibrant colours. They also added welcoming messages and words of gratitude, transforming the church environment into something even more special.

Simultaneously, preparations were underway for the "Pledge for Harmony" signature campaign. During their training, they had learned that public pledges were an effective way to spread messages of unity. The banner for the campaign was placed in a visible location to encourage community participation.

By 4pm, the church courtyard had been completely transformed. The cleanliness, the colourful alpana, and the signature campaign banner gave the place a fresh new look. The volunteers exchanged satisfied smiles, filled with pride and joy at their accomplishment.

### **A Moment of Recognition and Celebration**

Just then, Father Noren J Baidya and Sister Teresa Gomez arrived to see the completed work. Overwhelmed by what they saw, Father Noren addressed the volunteers in front of everyone, saying, "Your initiative is not only a gift to our church but also an inspiration for the entire community. We are truly grateful to you." His words filled the volunteers with happiness, their eyes gleaming with a sense of fulfillment.

The event concluded with a group photo with the Father and the Sisters of the Church. This picture was more than just a snapshot - it was a symbol of peace, unity, and the success of Youth Ending Hunger's mission. The young volunteers of Satkhira firmly believe that the message of harmony they painted that day will continue to inspire future generations.

## Message of Harmony in the Colours of Diversity

Engaging with The Hunger Project's Agents of Change: A Bangladesh Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Initiative, young volunteers in Chattogram have dedicated themselves to the path of harmony. This initiative, supported by the Church of England and the UK Government, has been implemented in Chattogram since 2023 (under the FoRBLN project at the time). As part of the programme, Youth Ending Hunger organised a three-day Youth Leadership Training for young volunteers. The subsequent activities of these trained volunteers received positive responses in Chattogram. Their efforts were presented before several senior political and faith leaders and the current Mayor of Chattogram City Corporation, Dr. Shahadat Hossain, earning them widespread appreciation. Their initiatives were not just events or celebrations; they were narratives of spreading the message of unity in society.

### Kuasha Festival



Prioritising social harmony, a 'Kuasha Festival' was organised at Chattogram University under the Agents of Change project on January 20, 2025. Young people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, including Bengali, Chakma, Marma, Garo, and Pankhua, showcased their cultures and traditions at the festival. Though it initially seemed like a general fair or festival, it carried a

profound message of harmony. In a society where people have different religious and ethnic identities, the opportunity to learn about each other's cultures and come together in celebration fosters mutual respect and relationships, playing a crucial role in promoting harmony. This was the core purpose of the festival.

The FoRB training instilled in young participants the idea that cultural exchange is one of the most effective ways to build bridges between different communities. The training emphasised that mutual respect is the foundation of harmony. The Kuasha Festival, organised by these young volunteers, successfully demonstrated this principle. More than 50 young individuals presented their traditional food and heritage, celebrating the beauty of diversity through music, dance, and various cultural performances. The participatory approach of this festival allowed young organisers to showcase mutual respect and solidarity.

## Short Films on Harmony



Another remarkable initiative by the youth was the short film 'Clara,' which premiered on July 9, 2024. The film featured the story of Clara, a Christian Santal girl, as the protagonist. The film highlighted how, despite existing social inequalities and prejudices, people from different religions and ethnic backgrounds embraced Clara as one of their own. It portrayed the possibility of peaceful coexistence and underscored the importance of religious and ethnic harmony in society.

Additionally, inspired by the creative workshops of The Hunger Project's Agents of Change initiative, the volunteers produced and promoted another short film, featuring the song 'Ami Banglay Gaan Gai' (I Sing in Bangla), to convey a message of unity beyond class, religion, and ethnicity. The young volunteers understood that storytelling and narrative-building are among the most effective ways to spread social messages. Through these films, they demonstrated that people from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds can come together to build a harmonious society.

## Social Harmony Workshop for Persons with Disabilities



To raise awareness about harmony at different levels of society, young volunteers organised social harmony workshops involving people from various religious and ethnic backgrounds. One such initiative by Youth Ending Hunger's Chattogram Unit was a workshop designed specifically for hearing-impaired individuals, a group often deprived of basic

rights and opportunities. This unique workshop was conducted with the assistance of a sign language specialist, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility. The workshop was held at the American Center in Chattogram with their support. Subsequently, the American Center shared a post about this initiative on social media. The young volunteers of Youth Ending Hunger firmly believe that small initiatives can bring significant change to society. With unwavering dedication, they continue working tirelessly to turn that belief into reality.

## Maitree Meeting

Trained volunteers of Youth Ending Hunger have also been organising regular harmony meetings titled 'Maitree Meeting' at Chattogram University. In these meetings, students from various religious and ethnic backgrounds come together to share insights about their beliefs and cultures. These gatherings are not merely for entertainment; they serve as an initiative to discover unity in diversity. Through competitions, study circles, and cultural exchanges, the message of harmony is spread. The dialogue and cultural exchange techniques learned from the Agents of Change project's training and workshops have played a key role in making these meetings successful. These gatherings are not just events but powerful platforms for fostering camaraderie among different communities.



The young volunteers of Youth Ending Hunger firmly believe that small initiatives can bring significant change to society. With unwavering dedication, they continue working tirelessly to turn that belief into reality.

## The Journey of Harmony



August 2024. Bangladesh was in turmoil due to political unrest. A mass uprising by students and the public led to the fall of the government, and the Prime Minister resigned and fled. Amidst this chaos, the young volunteers of Rangpur created a different narrative. Uniting for the cause of religious and social harmony, they initiated efforts that not only transformed Rangpur but also became an exemplary model for the entire nation.

At the heart of this transformation were the Social Harmony Units of Youth Ending Hunger Rangpur. These units were launched in 2023 under the FoRBLN project, prioritising religious freedom, belief, and social cohesion. The initiative was implemented under the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Program of The Hunger Project Bangladesh, with support from the Church of England and the UK Government. In 2024, these units organised two Youth Leadership Trainings aimed at equipping youth with leadership skills and spreading the message of harmony in society. The goal was to train young individuals to become ambassadors of peace in their communities. Over three days, 60 students from diverse religious and social backgrounds participated in these trainings, culminating in the formation of four Social Harmony Units actively engaged in promoting harmony.

These units began working at the local level to safeguard religious freedom and promote interfaith understanding. Their initiatives aimed to foster positive societal change and build bridges across religious differences. To achieve this, they organised harmony workshops, fact-checking training sessions on social media misinformation, regional debate festivals, and social media campaigns - helping young people develop a mindset of tolerance and respect for diversity.

Following the mass uprising in July 2024, as Durga Puja approached, the volunteers took swift action to prevent potential violence and attacks during the festivities. Their primary goal was to eliminate fear and ensure the safety of religious minorities. At that time, law enforcement was

weak, and past incidents of communal violence led to heightened concerns. Misinformation was rampant, exacerbating tensions. In response, on September 20, 2024, the volunteers organised a Social and Religious Harmony Dialogue at the Geography and Environmental Science Department Hall of Begum Rokeya University. The event brought together 84 representatives from different faiths and communities, including 30 women and 54 men. Leaders of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement also participated. Discussions at the meeting identified areas in the city at risk of violence and developed a joint strategy for conflict prevention. One remarkable proposal emerged from the dialogue - forming a Harmony Team in Rangpur, led by young people from various religious backgrounds. The team's mission was to address potential violence and foster coordination to ensure lasting peace in the community.



Recognising how misinformation fuels division, the volunteers organised two Fact-Checking Workshops to empower participants with the skills to counter misinformation and hate speech on social media. The goal was to prevent communal and religious violence and build public trust through factual information. A total of 69 participants attended these

workshops - where they learned strategies to verify information and combat fake news..

The youth of Rangpur also arranged Interfaith Harmony Dialogues, bringing together representatives from different religions and ethnic groups, religious and social leaders, and the transgender community. These dialogues provided a platform for sharing experiences, strengthening mutual understanding and solidarity.

Additionally, the youth leaders hosted the Youth Debate Festival 2025, themed "Harmony and Good Governance." The objective was to nurture a culture of respect for diverse perspectives among students. Held on January 4-7, 2025, the week-long debate competition saw the participation of over 250 students from 24 teams across Rangpur. The event promoted logical reasoning, tolerance, and the spirit of harmony among young minds.

The young volunteers of Youth Ending Hunger Rangpur have proven that effective leadership and active participation can be powerful tools for social harmony and positive change. Their efforts have not only fostered harmony in Rangpur but also laid a strong foundation for the future. Committed to their mission, these young changemakers pledge to continue combating misinformation, maintaining social harmony, and fostering unity in society.

The story of Rangpur stands as a testament to the transformative power of youth. It demonstrates that change is possible when young people take charge. The youth of Rangpur have indeed set a remarkable precedent in the journey towards religious and social harmony in Bangladesh.

## Youth Leadership in Promoting Religious Freedom and Harmony in Cox's Bazar



In Cox's Bazar, youth volunteers are setting a new precedent in establishing religious freedom and social harmony. This success has been driven by the Agents of Change: A Bangladesh Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Initiative, implemented by The Hunger Project Bangladesh with support from the Church of England and the UK government. Through this initiative, four batches of Youth Leadership Trainings were conducted in Cox's Bazar to engage young people in the path of harmony.

A total of 120 college and university students participated in these three-day training sessions. These sessions not only transformed their perspectives but also helped them develop leadership skills and essential competencies for promoting religious freedom and interfaith harmony. Following the training, the volunteer students united under the Youth Ending Hunger platform and formed eight Social Harmony Units. These units began working within their communities to raise awareness about interfaith understanding and religious freedom.

The members of these units initially organised several workshops in local schools and colleges in Cox's Bazar, emphasising the importance of religious freedom and harmony. Through these workshops, they conveyed that religious freedom is not just a right but also a fundamental principle for maintaining peace and harmony in society. As a result, the young volunteers extended the message of harmony beyond students and into the wider community.

However, their efforts did not stop there. These young volunteers-initiated dialogues with local political leaders, religious figures, and civil society leaders. These discussions helped create a clearer understanding of religious freedom, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence. All stakeholders agreed that mutual support is necessary to uphold religious freedom and harmony in society.

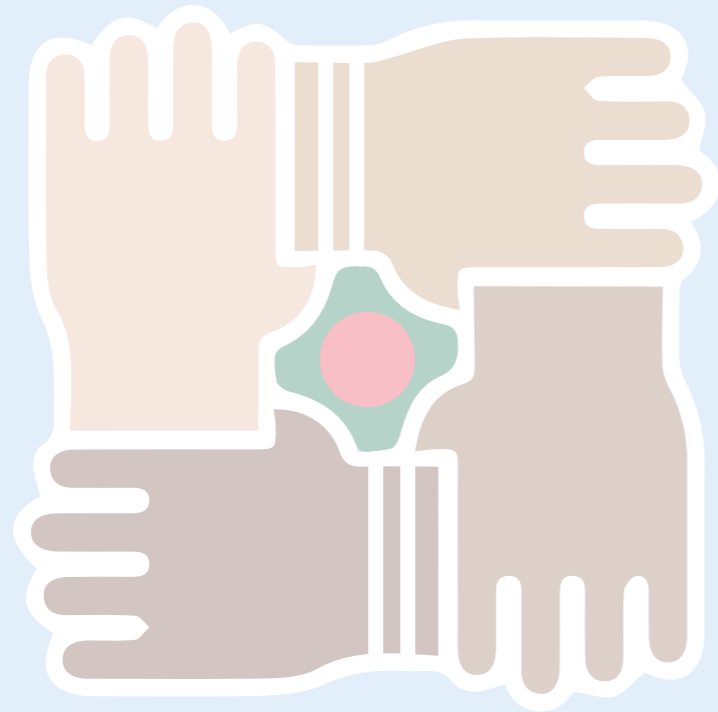
Through these youth-led initiatives, a culture of tolerance and respect has been expanding in Cox's Bazar. The Social Harmony Units had collaborated with the Cox's Bazar district branch of the Islamic Foundation under the previous ForBLN project. They urged the Foundation to issue directives for mosque imams to deliver sermons on religious harmony and peaceful coexistence during Friday prayers. Responding to their request, the Islamic Foundation issued such a directive on September 30, 2023. This played a significant role in promoting peace and harmony among Muslim religious leaders in Cox's Bazar. The youth-led initiative strengthened social cohesion, inspiring religious leaders to take an active role in building inclusive and peaceful communities.

Following the mass uprising and regime change on August 5, concerns about political and communal tensions and violence arose in Cox's Bazar. The situation became increasingly complex. However, the young volunteers from the Social Harmony Units under Youth Ending Hunger did not remain idle. They played a crucial role in preventing violence and maintaining peace. Working closely with local authorities, religious leaders, and civil society representatives, they actively worked to ensure the safety of minority communities.

Their proactive efforts and vigilant actions effectively contributed to violence prevention in Cox's Bazar. These young leaders proved that when youth unite for a cause, no obstacle can prevent them from fostering peace and upholding religious freedom in society.

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