

Religious Policy and Sustainable Development Goals: Integrating Faith-Based Governance into Public Policy

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Abstract

Religious actors increasingly participate in sustainable development, yet their involvement in public policy remains uneven across organizational forms, policy sectors, and institutional settings. This study examines how religious policy can structure the integration of faith-based governance into Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementation while maintaining inclusion, public accountability, and state neutrality. Using a qualitative document-based design, the study combines a structured review of relevant literature with thematic and comparative conceptual analysis of religious actors, governance arrangements, policy participation, and development practices. The analysis identified four interconnected dimensions of faith-based governance are norms, dialogue, institutions, and practice. Religious norms provide moral resources related to solidarity, dignity, justice, peace, and environmental responsibility, while dialogue facilitates interaction among religious, governmental, civil-society, and scientific actors. Institutional arrangements shape representation, coordination, participation, monitoring, and accountability, whereas practice reflects faith-based engagement across welfare, education, health, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, advocacy, and environmental action. The findings also reveal an important distinction between institutional visibility and community proximity, as formal faith-based organizations tend to have greater policy access while local and informal actors often possess stronger community embeddedness but weaker formal representation. The study conceptualizes faith-based governance as a context-dependent form of public governance in which religious participation is shaped by organizational capacity, institutional arrangements, representation, and accountability safeguards. This framework provides a basis for understanding how religious policy can organize faith-based participation in SDG-related public policy without assuming uniform benefits or causal effects across contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Research Background

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require coordination across policy sectors, levels of government, and societal actors rather than implementation by public authorities alone, and their translation into outcomes depends on institutional arrangements connecting global commitments with national and local action ([Hickmann et al., 2024](#)). Within this multi-actor environment, religious institutions and faith-based organizations (FBOs) have gained attention because they organize communities, articulate social values, and participate in development activities ([Haustein & Tomalin, 2021](#); [Tok et al., 2022](#)), and partnerships involving FBOs and religious ethics of dignity, solidarity, and stewardship can complement technical approaches to sustainability ([Abumoghli, 2024](#); [Boorse & Jablonski, 2024](#)).

The framework is intended to be general, but Indonesia serves as its explicit reference case. Indonesia combines a state that formally recognizes religions and maintains a Ministry of Religious Affairs with large FBOs active in education, health, welfare, and environmental programs ([Aryani et al., 2024](#); [Menchik, 2016](#)). [Presidential Regulation No. 111 of 2022](#) designates the Minister of National Development Planning (Bappenas) as SDG coordinator and names mass organizations (*organisasi kemasyarakatan*), philanthropy, business, and academia as non-state actors in action plans and working groups ([Presidential Regulation No. 111 of 2022](#)). Religious organizations therefore enter SDG governance mainly as mass organizations, while the Ministry of Religious Affairs shapes their environment through religious education, zakat, and interreligious harmony policies. For other regimes, the framework asks how instruments of recognition, partnership, funding, and consultation shape the four dimensions, rather than assuming the Indonesian configuration.

FBOs participate in healthcare, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, social protection, and community development, although the extent of their involvement varies ([Marshall et al., 2021](#)). They have contributed to maternal and child healthcare in Africa ([Nicol et al., 2022](#)), to health communication, vaccination, and socioeconomic responses by Indonesian Islamic organizations during COVID-19 ([Boro et al., 2022](#); [Prianto et al., 2023](#); [Rachmawati et al., 2022](#)), to policy responses to human trafficking ([Hounmenou, 2023](#)), and to climate action ([Klinkenborg & Fuchs, 2022](#)). The scale of these contributions is considerable: Indonesia has more than 42,000 registered Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) ([Bisnis.com, 2025](#)), and the national zakat body collected about Rp33 trillion in zakat, infaq, and alms in 2023 ([ANTARA, 2024](#)), resources increasingly linked to the SDGs ([Tok et al., 2022](#)). Systematic data on FBO participation in national SDG forums are,

however, not publicly available, which itself indicates the coordination problem addressed here.

This involvement does not imply an inherent advantage. Claims about FBOs' credibility, networks, and alternative visions must be assessed within the conditions shaping their practice (Koehrsen & Burchardt, 2024); religious resources interact with differences in capacity, leadership, and professionalization (Jacinto et al., 2023); environmental engagement faces financial, legislative, and staffing constraints (Hearn et al., 2024); and local faith actors may remain marginal in policy debates despite their proximity to communities (Trotta, 2023). The question is therefore how religious actors' participation, knowledge, and resources are connected to formal governance arrangements (Haustein & Tomalin, 2021; Hounmenou, 2023), which requires institutional relationships, partnership competencies, and religious literacy (Boorse & Jablonski, 2024).

In this study, religious policy denotes the public-policy arrangements through which governments recognize, engage, and structure relationships with religious actors, while faith-based governance refers to the participation of those actors and their institutional resources in sustainable-development processes. These definitions build on the literature on state–religion relations, which classifies how states support, restrict, or separate from religion (Fox, 2015; Kuru, 2009), and extend it to the arrangements through which states engage religious actors in development policy. Faith-based governance is the authors' working concept for governance *with* faith actors rather than the governance *of* faith actors, drawing on the actor-oriented account of faith actors in development (Tomalin, 2020) and on collaborative governance (Emerson et al., 2012).

Problem Identification

Despite growing recognition, faith-based participation remains unevenly institutionalized in SDG governance. Mechanisms defining how FBOs and other religious actors participate in policy formulation, implementation, coordination, monitoring, and evaluation remain unclear (Hickmann et al., 2024; Tomalin et al., 2019), and differences in capacity, representation, and access may privilege larger institutions over local, minority, women's, youth, or informal groups (Jati et al., 2024; Maes et al., 2024; Trotta, 2023); in Indonesia, membership of the interreligious harmony forums (FKUB) has been drawn largely from leaders of officially recognized religions and described as elitist and generationally narrow (Jati et al., 2024). Collaboration involving public resources also requires transparent responsibilities, measurable outcomes, nondiscrimination, and safeguards against coercive influence, sectarian preference, and political instrumentalization (Haustein & Tomalin, 2021; Raiu & Mina-Raiu, 2022; Steiner, 2012). The policy challenge is how religious policy can make faith-based governance an inclusive and accountable part of SDG implementation without displacing state responsibility or compromising democratic accountability.

Research Questions

1. What institutional arrangements does the literature identify through which religious policy structures the integration of faith-based actors into public-policy and SDG implementation processes?
2. What institutional capacities, coordination mechanisms, and participatory arrangements does the literature associate with the meaningful engagement of diverse religious actors in SDG planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation?
3. Which accountability and governance safeguards does the literature identify for keeping faith-based participation transparent, inclusive, measurable, rights-compatible, and consistent with state neutrality and democratic oversight?

Because the study synthesizes published literature, the answers identify mechanisms reported in that literature rather than establishing what is required in a particular setting. RQ1 is answered in the findings on religious policy instruments, RQ2 in the findings on dialogue, institutions, and practice, and RQ3 in the findings on safeguards.

Research Objectives and Significance

This study examines how faith-based governance can be incorporated into public policy within the SDG framework by identifying institutional arrangements for religious participation, the capacities required for meaningful participation, and the accountability conditions that keep collaboration transparent, inclusive, and measurable. Theoretically, it connects religious policy, faith-based governance, and SDG governance in one perspective rather than treating FBOs solely as charitable or service-delivery organizations; practically, it offers policymakers, development institutions, and religious actors a framework for assessing whether collaboration is inclusive and accountable without displacing state responsibility or weakening universal rights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship treats FBOs as heterogeneous actors whose identity, organizational form, authority, and community relationships vary, from informal initiatives to highly institutionalized organizations ([Maes et al., 2024](#)), and questions portrayals of religion as inherently supportive of or obstructive to development ([Wilkinson, 2022](#)). Religious contributions to the SDGs are shaped by power structures and political conditions ([Bamidele & Bamidele, 2026](#)); religious actors may be pioneers, followers, or resisters of sustainability transitions depending on commitment, resources, and environment ([Koehrsen & Ives, 2025](#)); and religion interacts with civic networks and administrative policy ([Sumi et al., 2025](#)). The literature has thus shifted from intrinsic qualities of religious organizations to the institutional conditions under which faith-based action acquires public significance.

Research on religious policy has a longer lineage in state–religion relations. States regulate, support, and restrict religion in many combinations, so separation and neutrality are only some of the available models (Fox, 2015); comparative work distinguishes passive from assertive secularism (Kuru, 2009); and Indonesia, which recognizes religions, funds religious education, and expects religious organizations to contribute to development, exemplifies tolerance without liberal separation (Menchik, 2016). This literature explains how states position religion but has rarely examined how these positions shape religious actors’ participation in SDG governance.

Studies of religious actors’ interaction with governments show that religion can facilitate or constrain collaborative environmental governance in Indonesia depending on its alignment with state, market, and community institutions (Ba & Liang, 2026); that state–FBO service partnerships in South Africa depend on the quality of collaboration (Onwuegbuchulam, 2024); and that faith-based development organizations must reconcile religious mission with donor, beneficiary, and performance accountability (Antwi Owusu & Agyemang, 2026). Engagement is also bounded by freedom of religion or belief, legality, and democratic standards (Raiu & Mina-Raiu, 2022), while collaboration among the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Muhammadiyah connects religious moderation with SDG 16 (Aryani et al., 2024).

Sectoral studies show how these relationships become practice while revealing fragmentation. Indonesia’s Istiqlal Mosque localizes sustainability norms through environmental management and outreach (Farabi & Fatharini, 2025), yet mosque sustainability performance is uneven (Hamidi et al., 2025); the translation of religious environmental ethics into public policy remains uncertain (Wijisen, 2025); religious moderation is linked to social harmony and SDG 16 (Soejoeti et al., 2024); and faith-derived ecological values are difficult to embed in legal and educational arrangements (Asmar, 2025).

These streams remain only partially connected. Integrative frameworks such as collaborative governance regimes (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015) and analyses linking religion to the SDGs (Tomalin et al., 2019) explain how cross-sector collaboration works or how religious actors relate to the goals, but specify less clearly how public authorities, through religious policy, allocate roles to heterogeneous religious actors, attach accountability safeguards, and reconcile participation with rights and state neutrality. Because Indonesian cases are prominent in this literature (Aryani et al., 2024; Ba & Liang, 2026; Farabi & Fatharini, 2025; Wijisen, 2025), Indonesia is the reference case. Table 1 summarizes key studies by country, actor type, sector, and main finding.

Table 1. Key studies on religious actors and sustainable development

Study	Country/ Context	Actor Type	Sector	Main Finding
Aryani et al. (2024)	Indonesia	Ministry of Religious Affairs, NU, Muhammadiyah	Peace and moderation (SDG 16)	State–FBO collaboration links religious moderation to SDG-oriented cooperation

Study	Country/ Context	Actor Type	Sector	Main Finding
Ba & Liang (2026)	Indonesia	Religious and secular community actors	Environment	Religion facilitates or constrains collective action depending on alignment with state, market, and community institutions
Farabi & Fatharini (2025)	Indonesia	Istiqlal Mosque	Environment	A religious institution localizes global sustainability norms
Onwuegbuchulam (2024)	South Africa	State and FBOs	Service delivery	Partnership effectiveness depends on the quality of collaboration
Antwi Owusu & Agyemang (2026)	Africa	Faith-based development organization	Social development	Religious identity shapes accountability to mission, donors, and beneficiaries
Hearn et al. (2024)	Switzerland	Religious organizations	Environment	Engagement is constrained by financial, legal, and staffing factors
Raiu & Mina-Raiu (2022)	Romania	Public administration and religious communities	Freedom of religion or belief	Engagement must respect legality and freedom of religion or belief
Maes et al. (2024)	Global (scoping review)	FBOs	Poverty alleviation	The FBO category is conceptually ambiguous and heterogeneous
Trotta (2023)	Global (review)	Local faith actors	Migration and development	Local faith actors remain marginal in formal policy debates
Marshall et al. (2021)	Global (review)	FBOs and religious actors	Multi-sector	Evidence is uneven across sectors; stronger in health and peacebuilding

Source: Authors' synthesis of the reviewed literature.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on post-secular governance and an actor-oriented perspective. Post-secular theory recognizes that religious perspectives may participate legitimately in public deliberation without replacing secular authority ([Baker, 2016](#); [Habermas, 2006](#)), while the actor-oriented approach emphasizes that social actors interpret, negotiate, and reshape development agendas ([Long, 2001](#)), which, applied to religion and development, highlights the heterogeneity and agency of faith actors ([Tomalin, 2020](#)). Because post-secular theory was developed for liberal democracies in which religion and state are separated ([Habermas, 2006](#)), its use where religion is embedded in the state, as in Indonesia ([Menchik, 2016](#)), is limited to the normative claim that religious contributions are legitimate if they remain open to scrutiny and translation into publicly accessible reasons.

The organization of participation is examined through collaborative governance, which emphasizes structured interaction, shared understanding, institutional design, and capacity for joint action ([Ansell & Gash, 2008](#); [Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015](#); [Emerson et al.,](#)

2012), and through accountability, understood as the obligation to explain and justify conduct to a forum capable of scrutiny (Bovens, 2007). Faith-based governance is thus conceptualized as a conditional form of collaborative governance in which religious actors contribute knowledge, networks, and normative resources while remaining subject to defined responsibilities, transparency, and public oversight (Boorse & Jablonski, 2024). Table 2 shows how the perspectives are integrated.

Table 2. Integration of the theoretical perspectives

Perspective	Key constructs contributed	Dimension(s) informed
Post-secular theory (Baker, 2016; Habermas, 2006)	Legitimacy of religious reasons in public deliberation; translation into publicly accessible reasons	Norms; dialogue
Actor-oriented approach (Long, 2001; Tomalin, 2020)	Heterogeneity and agency of faith actors; interpretation and negotiation of development agendas	Practice; dialogue
Collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012)	Institutional design, shared understanding, capacity for joint action, starting conditions and power imbalances	Institutions; dialogue
Accountability (Bovens, 2007)	Obligation to explain and justify conduct to a forum; answerability and consequences	Institutions; safeguards (cross-cutting)

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Conceptual Framework

The framework comprises four interrelated dimensions, synthesized from the perspectives above (Table 2; Figure 1). Norms concern the religious values and worldviews through which faith actors interpret development priorities, which may encourage, limit, or redirect engagement (Bamidele & Bamidele, 2026; Koehrsen & Ives, 2025; Rakodi, 2012). Dialogue captures communication, translation, and negotiation among religious perspectives, community knowledge, scientific expertise, and policy priorities (Boorse & Jablonski, 2024; Habermas, 2006; Tomalin, 2020). Institutions refer to the formal and informal arrangements of roles, procedures, coordination, resources, and monitoring (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012), and practice concerns how these are translated into participation and implementation (Koehrsen & Ives, 2025). The dimensions are interdependent rather than sequential, and participation must remain accountable, compatible with freedom of religion or belief and the rule of law, and guarded against monopolization and instrumentalization (Raiu & Mina-Raiu, 2022; Steiner, 2012).

Religious policy is not a fifth dimension but the overarching institutional context: legal recognition and registration, partnership agreements, funding rules, consultative councils, and SDG coordination bodies act on all four dimensions, most directly on institutions (Figure 1), and are evaluated through inclusion, nondiscrimination, transparency, human-rights protection, state neutrality, and democratic accountability (Boorse & Jablonski, 2024; Steiner, 2012). Because neutrality fits liberal-secular regimes better than states that recognize religions (Fox, 2015; Kuru, 2009), it is defined here as even-handedness rather than separation: authorities may engage religious actors but

should apply the same criteria to different religious communities, to minority and local belief groups, and to religious and non-religious actors. This definition remains applicable in Indonesia, which recognizes six religions (Menchik, 2016), because it concerns how engagement is distributed rather than whether it occurs.

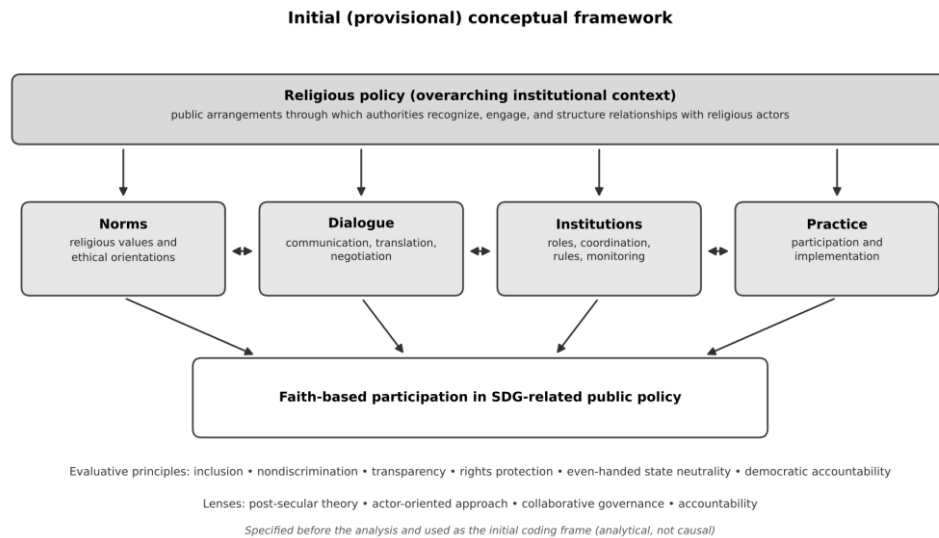


Figure 1. Initial (provisional) conceptual framework

Note: The framework was specified before the analysis and served as its initial coding frame; the revised model is presented in Figure 2. Source: Authors' elaboration.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive, document-based design informed by the actor-oriented perspective (Tomalin, 2020), because the relationship between religion and development is shaped by institutional context and the meanings through which religious actors engage with development (Rakodi, 2012). It combines a structured literature review, in the sense of a semi-systematic review synthesizing heterogeneous research streams (Snyder, 2019), with thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) and a stakeholder analysis adapted to secondary sources (Reed et al., 2009). Following stakeholder typologies (Mitchell et al., 1997; Reed et al., 2009), each actor type described in the literature was coded for power, legitimacy, resources, and interest, as well as the policy-cycle stage at which participation was reported, and actor types were compared across these attributes.

Searches in Scopus and Google Scholar combined the terms religion and development, faith-based organizations, religious policy, Sustainable Development Goals, public participation, interfaith cooperation, religious literacy, accountability, and collaborative governance, covering sources published between 2006 and 2026, predominantly English-language journal articles. After title, abstract, and full-text screening, sources were retained when they directly addressed the relationship among religious actors, sustainable development, public institutions, policy processes, or cross-sector partnerships; the aim was analytically relevant evidence rather than exhaustive coverage. The final corpus of 44 sources includes one book (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015), one master's dissertation (Mutie, 2019), and one Indonesian-language article (Asmar, 2025),

retained for their direct relevance, and is listed in Appendix Table A1; Long (2001) serves only as a theoretical anchor, and references added during revision are not part of the corpus.

The corpus comprises 18 empirical studies, 13 conceptual or policy-oriented articles, 6 reviews, and 7 theoretical works. By region, 8 sources concern Indonesia, 4 Africa, 3 Europe, 2 other Asian countries, and 1 Latin America, while 26 are global or not context-specific; by sector, 8 address environment and climate, 6 health, 3 peace or freedom of religion or belief, 8 social development, welfare, or finance, and 1 education, while 18 are multi-sector. Actors were grouped as public authorities, FBOs, civil-society organizations, and scientific institutions, with attention to the distinction between formal FBOs and local or informal actors and to the representation of women, youth, minorities, and smaller actors (Tomalin et al., 2019).

Thematic coding was organized around the four dimensions, which served as an initial frame, while cross-cutting themes (proselytization, sectarianism, gender inequality, exclusion, political instrumentalization, and tensions with universal rights) were drawn from the religion-and-development literature (Tomalin et al., 2019) and retained, revised, or merged according to the evidence. Coding was manual; the first and second authors each coded half of the corpus, a subset of [n] sources was double-coded, and disagreements were resolved by consensus (Table 3). The inductive component added three themes—the distinction between institutional visibility and community proximity, the concentration of participation in implementation rather than agenda setting, and religious literacy as a condition of dialogue—and two revisions of the frame: conditions and safeguards as cross-cutting categories, and religious policy instruments as an overarching category. A pattern is reported only when at least two sources support it.

Table 3. Excerpt from the codebook

Code (Dimension)	Definition	Example Indicator in the Literature
Religious values (norms)	Moral vocabularies used to frame development concerns	Stewardship, solidarity, or dignity invoked to justify environmental or welfare action
Exclusionary norms (norms)	Normative patterns limiting inclusion	Sectarian preference, patriarchal norms, minority exclusion
Cross-sector dialogue (dialogue)	Interaction among religious, governmental, civil-society, and scientific actors	Joint forums, partnerships with scientists or universities
Religious literacy (dialogue, inductive)	Capacity to recognize internal diversity of religious traditions	Training or competencies for engaging diverse faith actors
Visibility vs proximity (institutions, inductive)	Contrast between formal policy access and community embeddedness	Large FBOs in national forums; local actors trusted by communities but unrepresented
Policy-cycle stage (institutions, inductive)	Stage at which participation is reported	Implementation and service delivery vs agenda setting, budgeting, monitoring
Accountability safeguards (cross-cutting)	Mechanisms of answerability, transparency, and rights protection	Reporting to donors and beneficiaries, complaint mechanisms, nondiscrimination rules

Source: Authors' coding.

Trustworthiness was supported by an audit trail (extraction matrix, codebook, and analytic memos) and peer debriefing (Nowell et al., 2017). The second author works at an education and training office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which provided familiarity with Indonesian religious-policy institutions; no internal documents were used, and interpretations were checked against published sources. No primary policy documents, such as national SDG action plans, Voluntary National Reviews, or partnership regulations, were analyzed, which is a significant limitation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

The analysis was organized around the four a priori dimensions and produced three findings not specified in advance: the distinction between institutional visibility and community proximity, the concentration of faith-based participation in implementation rather than agenda setting, and the uneven distribution of evidence across sectors. Appendix Table A1 reports the evidence matrix, and Table 5 gives the number of sources supporting each dimension; frequency terms such as “recurring” refer to these counts.

Norms: Religious Values, Inclusion, and Rights-Based Orientations

The norms dimension contained recurring references to solidarity, compassion, social justice, stewardship, non-violence, responsibility toward future generations, tolerance, human dignity, and protection of vulnerable groups (Abumoghli, 2024; Bamidele & Bamidele, 2026; Koehrsen & Ives, 2025; Soejoeti et al., 2024), through which religious actors framed development concerns (Marshall et al., 2021; Tomalin, 2020).

The evidence also contained contrasting patterns. Religious affiliation was not consistently associated with inclusion, trust, or rights protection: sectarian preference and minority exclusion are documented by Tomalin et al. (2019), political instrumentalization by Haustein and Tomalin (2021) and Steiner (2012), and gender inequality by Moalla and Darmstadt (2024), who show that religious and customary norms operating alongside state law can entrench gender and health inequalities. These tensions were most visible for women, religious minorities, non-believers, and groups with limited formal representation.

Dialogue: Interfaith Cooperation, Mediation, and Religious Literacy

The dialogue dimension included interfaith cooperation, state–religion interaction, mediation, reconciliation, and communication among religious, governmental, civil-society, and scientific actors. Interfaith dialogue was associated with conflict prevention, social harmony, and human-rights awareness (Soejoeti et al., 2024) and with mediation and reconciliation (Abu-Nimer, 2001; Marshall et al., 2021), and cross-sector interaction involved public institutions, universities, development agencies, and youth groups

([Boorse & Jablonski, 2024](#); [Duff et al., 2016](#)), with faith actors interpreting and negotiating development priorities rather than only implementing them ([Tomalin, 2020](#)).

Religious literacy recurred as recognition of the internal diversity of traditions, together with partnership competencies and inclusive decision-making ([Boorse & Jablonski, 2024](#)). Barriers to dialogue included unequal representation and limited access for smaller or informal actors ([Tomalin et al., 2019](#); [Trotta, 2023](#)), fragmented coordination ([Hickmann et al., 2024](#)), weak institutional support ([Hearn et al., 2024](#)), and political instrumentalization ([Haustein & Tomalin, 2021](#)); symbolic consultation is the authors' interpretation, suggested but not directly measured by these studies. Minorities, women, youth, and local actors were most frequently identified as having weaker access to formal dialogue.

Institutions: Representation, Coordination, and Accountability

The institutions dimension revealed a recurring distinction between large, formally established FBOs, which were more visible in formal and global policy settings, and local congregations, religious leaders, informal associations, and minority communities, which were more often associated with local knowledge, community trust, and proximity to vulnerable populations ([Marshall et al., 2021](#); [Tomalin et al., 2019](#)) but also with constraints in funding, technical knowledge, policy vocabulary, and reporting systems ([Trotta, 2023](#)). The evidence did not establish that greater visibility corresponded with greater effectiveness, inclusiveness, or local legitimacy.

Institutional evidence included policy consultation, cross-sector partnerships, service-delivery collaboration, interfaith councils, grant mechanisms, monitoring, and evaluation ([Aryani et al., 2024](#); [Onwuegbuchulam, 2024](#)). Participation was more clearly documented in implementation and service delivery than in agenda setting, budgeting, monitoring, or evaluation: among sources reporting the stage of participation, [n] document implementation or service delivery, whereas [n] report participation in agenda setting or formulation (for example, [Klinkenborg & Fuchs, 2022](#)) and [n] in monitoring or evaluation (for example, [Steiner, 2012](#)), while [Mutie \(2019\)](#) and [Trotta \(2023\)](#) note the limited participation of local faith actors in formal SDG forums. Accountability themes included financial transparency, reporting, measurable outcomes, complaint mechanisms, and public scrutiny ([Steiner, 2012](#)).

Practice: Multi-Sector Contributions to SDG Implementation

The practice dimension documented engagement in poverty reduction, welfare, education, health, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, advocacy, environmental stewardship, volunteer mobilization, and civic education ([Marshall et al., 2021](#); [Tomalin et al., 2019](#)), associated with SDG 1, 3, 4, 10, 13, 16, and 17. The mapping was conservative: an SDG was listed only when a source explicitly linked faith-based activities to it or an activity corresponded directly to its targets ([Mutie, 2019](#); [Tomalin et al., 2019](#)), and it was carried out by [the first author and checked by the second author]. Because the sources

provide little evidence of activities directed at SDG 2 and SDG 5 targets, gender is treated as a cross-cutting concern rather than an outcome (Marshall et al., 2021).

Evidence was uneven: health and peacebuilding were well represented, whereas women's empowerment, family planning, child protection, and gender-based violence were not (Marshall et al., 2021). Mutie (2019) linked a Kenyan FBO's activities to six SDGs while reporting limited knowledge of the SDG framework and participation in formal forums; as a single dissertation, it has limited generalizability, but its observation is consistent with Trotta (2023). Practical engagement also varied with organizational capacity, technical expertise, funding, and data systems. Table 4 summarizes the comparative patterns across the four dimensions.

Table 4. Analytical Dimensions and Comparative Patterns of Faith-Based Governance

Analytical Dimension	Main Themes	Comparative Pattern	Related SDGs
Norms	Solidarity, social justice, dignity, inclusion, peace, stewardship, and protection of vulnerable groups appeared alongside sectarianism, gender inequality, exclusion, and political instrumentalization.	Normative orientations differed across organizations and social contexts.	SDGs 10, 13, 16
Dialogue	Interfaith dialogue, mediation, reconciliation, religious literacy, and cross-sector communication were recurrent themes.	Formal actors had greater access to institutional dialogue, while smaller, minority, women, and youth actors were less consistently represented.	SDGs 16, 17
Institutions	Representation, coordination, funding, participation, monitoring, and accountability were recurring institutional themes.	Large/formal FBOs showed greater institutional visibility, while local/informal actors showed stronger community proximity but weaker formal representation.	SDGs 10, 16, 17
Practice	Faith actors were involved in welfare, education, health, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, advocacy, environmental action, and volunteer mobilization.	Evidence was stronger in health and peacebuilding than in several gender- and protection-related sectors.	SDGs 1, 3, 4, 10, 13, 16, 17

Table 5. Evidence base and religious-policy implications by dimension

Dimension	Supporting Sources (n)	Examples of Supporting Sources	Religious-Policy Implications
Norms	22	Abumoghli (2024) ; Asmar (2025) ; Ba & Liang (2026) ; Baker (2016)	Recognize faith-derived values in policy dialogue while subjecting them to rights and nondiscrimination standards
Dialogue	13	Abumoghli (2024) ; Ansell & Gash (2008) ; Aryani et al. (2024) ; Baker (2016)	Consultation rules that include minority, women's, youth, and local actors; religious-literacy training for officials

Dimension	Supporting Sources (n)	Examples of Supporting Sources	Religious-Policy Implications
Institutions	25	Ansell & Gash (2008) ; Antwi Owusu & Agyemang (2026) ; Aryani et al. (2024) ; Asmar (2025)	Registration, funding-eligibility, and partnership criteria that do not exclude less formal actors; participation beyond implementation
Practice	20	Aryani et al. (2024) ; Ba & Liang (2026) ; Boorse & Jablonski (2024) ; Boro et al. (2022)	Technical and reporting support for smaller actors; sector-specific monitoring of contributions
Safeguards (cross-cutting)	7	Antwi Owusu & Agyemang (2026) ; Bovens (2007) ; Haustein & Tomalin (2021) ; Moalla & Darmstadt (2024)	Minimum accountability conditions for partnerships involving public resources; even-handed treatment of actors
Religious policy instruments	11	Aryani et al. (2024) ; Asmar (2025) ; Duff et al. (2016) ; Haustein & Tomalin (2021)	Make instruments (recognition, contracts, grants, councils, SDG bodies) explicit objects of evaluation

Note. Counts refer to the 44 sources in Appendix Table A1; a source may support more than one dimension.

Religious Policy Instruments Structuring Faith-Based Participation (RQ1)

Evidence on religious policy instruments was limited: 11 of the 44 sources discuss instruments structuring faith-based participation. They include partnership and service-delivery arrangements in South Africa and in responses to human trafficking ([Hounmenou, 2023](#); [Onwuegbuchulam, 2024](#)), high-level public-religious collaboration ([Duff et al., 2016](#)), consultative engagement in policy discourse ([Klinkenborg & Fuchs, 2022](#)), cooperation among the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Muhammadiyah ([Aryani et al., 2024](#)), legal and educational policy on ecological values ([Asmar, 2025](#); [Wijsen, 2025](#)), regulation of Islamic social finance ([Tok et al., 2022](#)), and legal standards of freedom of religion or belief ([Raiu & Mina-Raiu, 2022](#)). These instruments tend to engage formally established organizations mainly in implementation, linking them directly to the visibility-proximity distinction and the policy-cycle concentration.

Safeguards: Rights, Accountability, and State Neutrality (RQ3)

Safeguards were discussed in 7 sources: rights-based safeguards where administration engages religious communities under legality and freedom of religion or belief ([Raiu & Mina-Raiu, 2022](#)); accountability to beneficiaries, donors, and religious missions ([Antwi Owusu & Agyemang, 2026](#)) and transparency in interfaith global governance ([Steiner, 2012](#)), consistent with relational accountability ([Bovens, 2007](#)); and protections against exclusion and instrumentalization motivated by sectarian preference, gender inequality, and populist uses of religion ([Haustein & Tomalin, 2021](#); [Moalla & Darmstadt, 2024](#); [Tomalin et al., 2019](#)). No source examined how state neutrality is operationalized in partnerships, so the even-handedness criterion remains a normative proposition. The evidence thus supports rights protection where public resources are involved, answerability to beneficiaries as well as funders, and protections against exclusion where

formal organizations dominate representation. Figure 2 synthesizes the dimensions and safeguards.

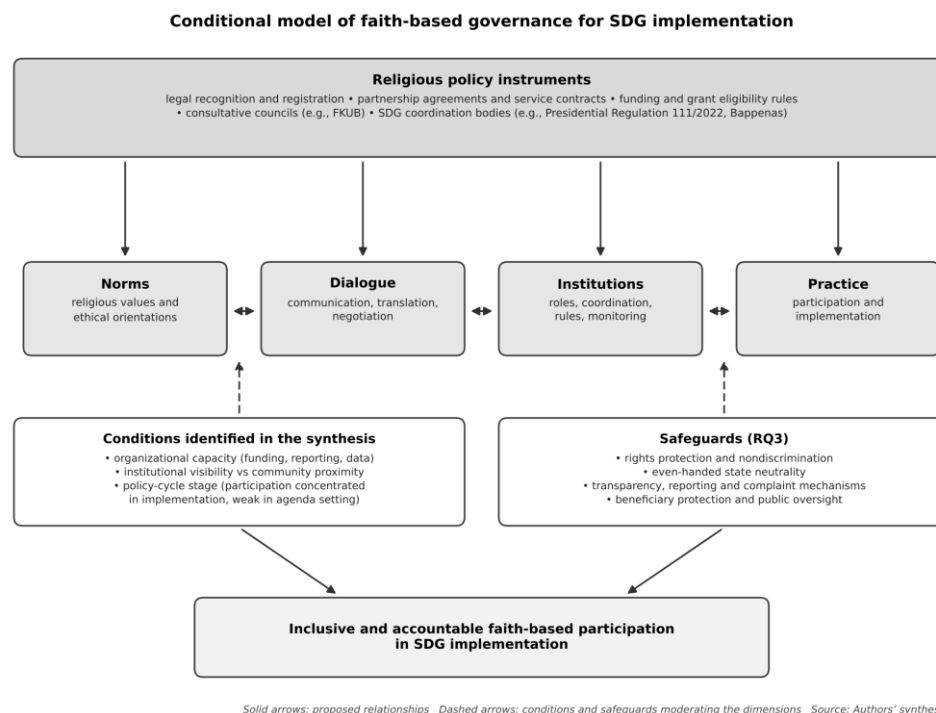


Figure 2. Conditional Model of Faith-Based Governance for SDG Implementation

Note: Solid arrows indicate proposed relationships; dashed arrows indicate conditions and safeguards that moderate the dimensions. The SDG colour wheel used in the earlier version has been removed. Source: Authors' synthesis.

Discussion

Faith-based involvement in SDG governance is conditional on actor configuration, capacity, institutional position, and context, which explains why actors sharing a religious identity assume different roles. This is consistent with the actor-oriented view that faith actors interpret and adapt development agendas (Tomalin, 2020), with the multiple roles of religious actors in sustainability transitions (Koehrsen & Ives, 2025), and with Indonesian evidence that collaborative environmental governance can emerge through religious, multireligious, and secular pathways (Ba & Liang, 2026). What this study adds beyond the conditional view (Koehrsen & Burchardt, 2024) is a specification of where the conditions operate in religious policy: the visibility–proximity distinction identifies which actors instruments include, the implementation concentration identifies the stages at which faith actors are absent, and the safeguards analysis identifies which conditions remain untested.

Religious norms provide moral vocabularies linking belief to development concerns but do not automatically produce inclusive action; their policy significance emerges when they are translated into practice under principles of rights and nondiscrimination, consistent with post-secular governance (Habermas, 2006). The Istiqlal Mosque translated stewardship and harm avoidance into resource management and education (Farabi & Fatharini, 2025), yet religious environmental organizations remain

heterogeneous and constrained ([Hearn et al., 2024](#)), and the incorporation of religious ethics into policy is uncertain ([Wijsen, 2025](#)). Norms are thus a potential governance resource rather than a guarantee.

Dialogue findings indicate that the presence of faith actors in forums is insufficient when involvement is symbolic; different moral vocabularies, knowledge, and expertise must be negotiated, consistent with collaborative governance theory ([Ansell & Gash, 2008](#); [Emerson et al., 2012](#)). In religiously diverse settings, religious literacy is an additional requirement, because representation that ignores internal diversity reduces traditions to homogeneous actors ([Boorse & Jablonski, 2024](#)). The quality of dialogue is therefore better assessed by its capacity to accommodate diverse knowledge and historically under-represented groups than by the number of actors present.

The visibility–proximity distinction explains unequal representation: large organizations possess legal status, administrative resources, and reporting capacity that make them legible to government, whereas local actors are socially embedded but administratively weaker ([Maes et al., 2024](#)). This parallels the localization debate, in which partners engage visible FBOs rather than the local actors closest to communities ([Trotta, 2023](#); [Wilkinson, 2022](#)), and credibility and networks do not operate linearly ([Koehrsen & Burchardt, 2024](#)), so administrative capacity and community legitimacy must be distinguished. The contribution here is to translate this into policy design: registration, funding-eligibility, and consultation rules can favour visible organizations, as with legal registration requirements for mass organizations ([Law No. 16 of 2017](#)) and FKUB membership ([Jati et al., 2024](#)) in Indonesia. Simplified registration for community groups, grant windows for local initiatives, and reserved seats in consultative bodies follow directly.

Accountability becomes more important as religious organizations move into public-service provision and partnerships. Following [Bovens \(2007\)](#), it is a relationship in which an actor must explain and justify conduct to a forum; religious identity shapes how faith-based development organizations understand accountability to missions, donors, and beneficiaries ([Antwi Owusu & Agyemang, 2026](#)), and formal public roles extend it to transparency, monitoring, grievance mechanisms, beneficiary protection, and nondiscrimination. Public accountability is thus not a restriction on religious autonomy but a consequence of involvement in decisions affecting the public interest. Zakat governance illustrates this: in Indonesia, zakat is collected by BAZNAS and licensed institutions under a state-regulated system ([Law No. 23 of 2011](#)), and aligning about Rp33 trillion in annual collections with the SDGs raises questions of reporting, answerability to beneficiaries, and coherence with development priorities ([ANTARA, 2024](#); [Tok et al., 2022](#)).

Practice findings show that faith actors combine service provision, value formation, and network building across sectors, as the Istiqlal Mosque illustrates ([Farabi & Fatharini, 2025](#)), yet mosque sustainability performance varies considerably ([Hamidi et al., 2025](#)). Breadth of activity is therefore no substitute for effectiveness, and uneven evidence across sectors may reflect differences in experience, technical capacity, and measurement systems; contributions are better assessed through community embeddedness, capacity, and institutional connectivity than through religious status or network size.

The analysis repositions religious policy as a component of public governance rather than merely a regulatory domain, consistent with collaborative-governance views of differentiated responsibilities (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015) and with the actor-oriented recognition that religious actors retain their own interpretations (Tomalin, 2020). Concretely, governments structure faith-based participation through legal recognition and registration, partnership agreements and service contracts, funding rules, consultative councils, and SDG coordination bodies. In Indonesia, these include the registration of mass organizations (Law No. 16 of 2017), recognition and funding of pesantren (Law No. 18 of 2019), state regulation of zakat (Law No. 23 of 2011), FKUB (Jati et al., 2024), and SDG coordination led by Bappenas (Presidential Regulation No. 111 of 2022). Because Indonesia recognizes religions (Menchik, 2016), neutrality cannot mean separation; the even-handedness criterion asks whether these instruments apply the same rules to different communities, to minority and local belief groups, and to religious and non-religious actors, a tension most visible where consultative bodies and funding rules privilege recognized organizations.

Novelty and Contribution

Building on the conditional view of religious actors (Koehrsen & Burchardt, 2024; Koehrsen & Ives, 2025; Tomalin, 2020), the study applies that view to religious policy design through the visibility–proximity distinction and the identification of policy-cycle stages at which faith actors are absent, and integrates norms, dialogue, institutions, and practice to explain how values, communication, arrangements, and capacities jointly shape participation. It extends actor-oriented, post-secular, and collaborative governance approaches by showing that religious legitimacy, community embeddedness, visibility, and administrative capacity are distinct attributes, and it broadens religious policy into an instrument for structuring representation, coordination, accountability, and safeguards. Conceptually, it links developmental studies of FBOs with the religion–state literature (Fox, 2015; Kuru, 2009; Menchik, 2016).

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The study's qualitative, document-based design means that the relationships identified are analytical patterns rather than causal effects. The evidence was uneven across organizational types, sectors, and policy stages, with formal FBOs more visible than local, minority, or informal actors. Further limitations are the restriction to Scopus, Google Scholar, and mostly English-language sources; the a priori coding frame and manual coding without reliability statistics; the absence of primary policy documents; and reliance on a single dissertation for part of the SDG mapping. Future research should use comparative field studies, mixed methods, and longitudinal designs, with attention to local organizations, minorities, women, youth, and less examined sectors.

CONCLUSIONS

In response to the first research question, this study concludes that religious policy can provide an institutional basis for integrating faith-based governance into SDG-related public policy through arrangements for participation, coordination, and role allocation among public authorities, faith-based organizations, and other societal actors. The findings show that, in the reviewed literature, these instruments tend to engage formally visible organizations and to involve religious actors mainly in implementation rather than in agenda setting, budgeting, monitoring, or evaluation.

In response to the second research question, meaningful participation is associated with organizational capacity, religious literacy, inclusive representation, and opportunities for both formal and local actors to engage across policy processes. In response to the third, accountability safeguards are supported under specific conditions: rights protection and nondiscrimination where public resources are involved, answerability to beneficiaries as well as funders, and protections against exclusion where formal organizations dominate representation; how even-handed neutrality is operationalized in partnerships has not yet been examined empirically.

Across these arrangements, norms, dialogue, institutions, and practice constitute interconnected dimensions through which faith-based participation can be understood. Religious policy should therefore be viewed not only as the regulation of religious affairs, but also as a governance framework for organizing the involvement of religious actors in sustainable development and public policy.

Three recommendations follow for policymakers. First, governments should establish participation arrangements open to local, minority, women's, youth, and informal religious actors, for example through transparent criteria for consultation and technical support for engaging in policy processes, so that formal organizations do not dominate. Second, public authorities should set minimum accountability safeguards for any collaboration involving public resources, including financial transparency, reporting, complaint mechanisms, nondiscrimination, and beneficiary protection. Third, participation should be monitored and evaluated across the policy cycle, including agenda setting and budgeting, using data on which actors take part and what influence they have.

In Indonesia, these recommendations concern the Ministry of Religious Affairs (consultation rules and support for local and minority actors), Bappenas and regional planning agencies (accountability standards for SDG partnerships involving public resources), and local governments with Bappenas (monitoring which actors participate at each stage of the policy cycle). Because the framework rests on a literature synthesis without primary policy documents, these recommendations and the relationships in Figure 2 require empirical validation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Muh. Hasanain contributed to the conceptualization, methodology development, and drafting of the manuscript; **Widodo** contributed to data synthesis, analysis, and critical

revision; and **Johndustern Wennberg** contributed to the construction of the policy framework, interpretation of the findings, and final review and approval of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USE

During manuscript preparation, generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a limited supporting capacity to assist with language editing, organization of arguments, and preparation of visual presentation. The tools were not treated as sources of evidence, and they did not replace the authors' responsibility for the research design, interpretation of the literature, verification of references, or final conclusions. All AI-assisted content was reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Sources in the analytical corpus and evidence matrix (n = 44)

No.	Source	Design	Region	Sector	N	D	I	P	S	R
1	Abumoghli (2024)	Conceptual	Global	Environment	✓	✓				
2	Ansell & Gash (2008)	Theoretical	General	Governance (general)		✓	✓			
3	Antwi Owusu & Agyemang (2026)	Empirical	Africa	Social development			✓		✓	
4	Aryani et al. (2024)	Empirical	Indonesia	Peace and moderation (SDG 16)		✓	✓	✓		✓
5	Asmar (2025)	Empirical	Indonesia	Education and environment	✓		✓			✓
6	Ba & Liang (2026)	Empirical	Indonesia	Environment	✓		✓	✓		
7	Baker (2016)	Theoretical	General	Governance (general)	✓	✓				
8	Bamidele & Bamidele (2026)	Conceptual	Global	Multi-sector	✓		✓			
9	Boorse & Jablonski (2024)	Conceptual	Global	Environment		✓		✓		
10	Boro et al. (2022)	Review	Global	Health				✓		
11	Bovens (2007)	Theoretical	General	Governance (general)			✓		✓	
12	Duff et al. (2016)	Conceptual	Global	Multi-sector		✓	✓			✓
13	Emerson & Nabatchi (2015)	Theoretical	General	Governance (general)		✓	✓			
14	Emerson et al. (2012)	Theoretical	General	Governance (general)		✓	✓			
15	Farabi & Fatharini (2025)	Empirical	Indonesia	Environment	✓			✓		
16	Habermas (2006)	Theoretical	General	Governance (general)	✓	✓				
17	Hamidi et al. (2025)	Empirical	Other Asia	Social development			✓	✓		
18	Haustein & Tomalin (2021)	Conceptual	Global	Multi-sector	✓				✓	✓
19	Hearn et al. (2024)	Empirical	Europe	Environment	✓		✓	✓		
20	Hickmann et al. (2024)	Review	Global	Governance (general)			✓			✓
21	Hounmenou (2023)	Empirical	Global	Social development			✓	✓		✓
22	Jacinto et al. (2023)	Empirical	Latin America	Health	✓		✓	✓		
23	Klinkenborg & Fuchs (2022)	Empirical	Europe	Environment	✓	✓				✓
24	Koehrsen & Burchardt (2024)	Conceptual	Global	Multi-sector	✓		✓			

No.	Source	Design	Region	Sector	N	D	I	P	S	R
25	Koehrsen & Ives (2025)	Conceptual	Global	Environment	✓			✓		
26	Maes et al. (2024)	Review	Global	Social development			✓			
27	Marshall et al. (2021)	Review	Global	Multi-sector	✓	✓	✓	✓		
28	Moalla & Darmstadt (2024)	Conceptual	Global	Health	✓				✓	
29	Mutie (2019)	Empirical	Africa	Multi-sector				✓		
30	Nicol et al. (2022)	Review	Africa	Health				✓		
31	Onwuegbuchulam (2024)	Empirical	Africa	Social development			✓	✓		✓
32	Prianto et al. (2023)	Empirical	Indonesia	Health				✓		
33	Rachmawati et al. (2022)	Empirical	Indonesia	Health				✓		
34	Raiu & Mina-Raiu (2022)	Empirical	Europe	Peace and moderation (SDG 16)			✓		✓	✓
35	Rakodi (2012)	Theoretical	General	Multi-sector	✓		✓			
36	Soejoeti et al. (2024)	Conceptual	Indonesia	Peace and moderation (SDG 16)	✓	✓				
37	Steiner (2012)	Empirical	Global	Governance (general)			✓		✓	
38	Sumi et al. (2025)	Empirical	Other Asia	Social development	✓			✓		
39	Tok et al. (2022)	Conceptual	Global	Social development			✓	✓		✓
40	Tomalin (2020)	Conceptual	Global	Multi-sector	✓	✓				
41	Tomalin et al. (2019)	Conceptual	Global	Multi-sector	✓		✓	✓	✓	
42	Trotta (2023)	Review	Global	Social development			✓	✓		
43	Wijsen (2025)	Empirical	Indonesia	Environment	✓					✓
44	Wilkinson (2022)	Conceptual	Global	Multi-sector	✓					
Total					22	13	25	20	7	11

Note: N = norms; D = dialogue; I = institutions; P = practice; S = safeguards; R = religious policy instruments. A tick indicates that the source provides evidence or arguments coded under that category. Long (2001) is a theoretical anchor and is not part of the corpus.

Source: Authors' compilation.