

Religious Literacy and Youth Peacebuilding: Interfaith Engagements in Indonesian Communities

Zulfan Taufik, Vivi Yulia Nora, and Mardian Sulistyati

This article examines how interfaith youth communities in Indonesia use religious literacy for grassroots peacebuilding in diverse religious contexts. Based on qualitative case studies from Muslim-, Hindu-, and Christian-majority regions, the study highlights youth-led initiatives that promote interreligious understanding, civic cooperation, and social inclusion. Through interviews, observations, and document analysis in five cities, the findings show that sustained engagement helps youth build critical religious literacy, challenge stereotypes, and foster locally rooted peace strategies. Moving beyond institutional frameworks, the study emphasizes youth agency in navigating complex religious dynamics. It contributes to global peacebuilding discourse by showing how youth-driven religious literacy can support inclusive and participatory models of coexistence, relevant not only in Indonesia but also in other plural societies.

Keywords religious literacy, peacebuilding, interfaith dialogue, youth, Indonesia

Introduction

Indonesia, as one of the world's most religiously diverse nations, continues to navigate the challenges and promises of pluralism. With more than 270 million people adhering to six officially recognized religions and numerous indigenous belief systems, the country serves as a dynamic site for understanding how religious identity shapes social cohesion (Stirling 2024). Amidst this pluralistic landscape, youth emerge as critical agents in fostering interreligious understanding and advancing peacebuilding efforts at the grassroots level (Taufik 2020; Suhadi and Sandyarani 2022). In recent years, global scholarship has increasingly recognized the role of young people in mitigating conflict and cultivating sustainable peace, particularly in contexts marked by religious diversity (Felice and Wisler 2007; Taufik 2019; Ragandang 2020).

At the heart of these youth-led initiatives lies the concept of religious literacy—a framework that equips individuals with the capacity to engage respectfully and knowledgeably with diverse religious beliefs, histories, and practices. Scholars have highlighted religious literacy as a vital tool in resisting polarization, promoting empathy, and enabling constructive dialogue across religious lines (Dinham and Shaw 2017; Hannam et al. 2020; Moore 2006). Conversely, religious illiteracy has been linked to growing sectarian tensions, misperceptions, and violence both within and across religious communities (Ashraf 2019; Prothero 2007; Seiple and Hoover 2021). In this light, promoting religious literacy is not only an educational imperative, but a peacebuilding strategy, particularly in societies where religion plays a central role in public and private life.

Beyond its ethical and pedagogical dimensions, religious literacy has also gained relevance in the global policy arena. Its role is increasingly recognized within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in relation to inclusive education (Goal 4) and the promotion of peaceful and just societies (Goal 16). Studies have shown how a deeper understanding of religious dynamics can contribute to sustainable development by reducing conflict and enabling cooperation across difference (Tomalin, Haustein, and Kidy 2019). However, most institutional approaches to religious literacy tend to focus on formal settings—schools, religious education curricula, or government-led interfaith programs—thereby often neglecting informal, youth-driven initiatives that operate outside conventional frameworks (Dinham, Francis, and Shaw 2017; Ashraf 2019; Halafoff et al. 2020).

In Indonesia, for instance, existing research has largely emphasized formal religious education (Zuhdi and Sarwenda 2020), teacher training, and structured dialogue initiatives involving religious leaders and state actors (Sofjan 2020). While these efforts are important, they often overlook the lived experiences and agency of youth who independently engage with religious diversity in their everyday environments. These young people are not simply recipients of religious knowledge; they actively interpret, negotiate, and enact religious literacy through creative and collaborative peacebuilding efforts within their communities.

Therefore, this article seeks to address this gap by exploring how interfaith youth communities in Indonesia conceptualize and practice religious literacy as a means of fostering peace. Drawing on case studies from Muslim-, Hindu-, and Christian-majority regions, it examines how young people develop the discursive and relational tools necessary to build bridges across religious boundaries, counter exclusivist narratives, and nurture pluralistic imaginaries. In doing so, the study investigates how youth engage with religious literacy in their peacebuilding efforts, the strategies they employ to foster intergroup understanding, and the ways in which their initiatives contribute to broader processes of social cohesion. By situating these inquiries within both local and global discourses,

the article argues that youth-led religious literacy initiatives represent a vital yet underexamined resource for fostering sustainable peace in Indonesia's plural society.

Method

This study employed a qualitative multi-site case study approach to explore how interfaith youth communities in Indonesia understand and practice religious literacy in their peacebuilding efforts. Fieldwork was conducted between April and October 2023 in five Indonesian cities—Padang, Mataram, Yogyakarta, Denpasar, and Manado—each selected for their distinct socio-religious contexts that reflect the pluralistic and often contested nature of religious life in the country.

Padang (West Sumatra) and Mataram (West Nusa Tenggara) represent Muslim-majority regions where Islamic norms strongly influence public and social life. These cities are often characterized by a higher degree of religious conservatism and a visible presence of Islamic orthodoxy in educational and communal institutions. In contrast, Denpasar (Bali) is predominantly Hindu and shaped by a deep-rooted cultural religiosity, where Balinese Hinduism informs both spiritual and civic identity. Manado (North Sulawesi), often referred to as the “City of a Thousand Churches,” reflects a Christian-dominant context, with Protestant and Catholic traditions shaping much of the public space and discourse. Yogyakarta, meanwhile, is renowned for its multicultural and multireligious character, where a diverse array of Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist communities co-exist amidst a vibrant academic and civic landscape. The purposive selection of these five cities aimed to capture the varied manifestations of interfaith youth engagement and the contextual challenges they navigate in their religious literacy and peacebuilding initiatives.

Data collection relied on four primary techniques: (1) direct observation of youth-led events and community interactions; (2) in-depth interviews with interfaith youth leaders and members; (3) document analysis of organizational reports, social media campaigns, and educational materials; and (4) active participation in workshops, dialogues, and public forums. In several cities, the research team took part as facilitators or resource persons in interfaith activities, allowing deeper ethnographic immersion into the communities' language, practices, and internal dynamics.

The study engaged over thirty participants between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, all affiliated with various youth-based interfaith communities and movements. The interviews were recorded with the informant's consent and lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes. In addition to field notes, supplementary data were gathered from local offices of the Ministry of Religious

Affairs, religious harmony forums (FKUB), legal aid institutes (LBH), regional ombudsman offices, and university-based religious studies centers. The research was supported by local collaborators in each city, who facilitated access to key informants and ensured contextual sensitivity during field engagement.

Data analysis in this study followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), encompassing three core stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction phase, relevant information from interviews, fieldnotes, and documents was systematically coded and categorized to identify recurring patterns related to youth agency, religious literacy, and interfaith peacebuilding. These coded data were then organized into thematic displays, including matrices and narrative summaries, to facilitate interpretation and cross-case comparison. The final stage involved drawing conclusions and verifying them through iterative reflection and alignment with theoretical frameworks. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, we applied criteria outlined by Nowell et al. (2017), including credibility (through member checking and peer debriefing), dependability (by maintaining a transparent audit trail of analytical decisions), confirmability (through reflexive memos and external review), and transferability (by providing rich contextual descriptions of the five research sites). This combined approach ensured both analytical rigor and methodological transparency throughout the study.

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Research and Community Service Institute at the State Islamic University Sjech M. Djamil Djambek Bukittinggi. All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. While most identities have been anonymized to protect confidentiality, several individuals explicitly agreed to be identified and quoted in the article. Ethical research practices were upheld throughout the fieldwork, including transparency regarding the researchers' roles, voluntary participation, and ongoing peer debriefing to ensure reflexivity and integrity in the research process.

Contextualizing Interfaith Youth Engagement in Indonesia

Interfaith youth organizing in Indonesia exists within a complex interplay of government initiatives and civil society movements. The country's religious diversity, coupled with its decentralized governance, has led to the development of various models of youth engagement in religious literacy and peacebuilding efforts. Broadly, these forums fall into two main categories: those initiated by the government—such as through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, FKUB, or local political agencies like City Agency for National Unity and Politics (Kesbangpol)—and those organized independently by civil society organizations (CSOs), both local and international.

Government-led forums tend to adopt more formalistic approaches, focusing on generic themes such as religious tolerance, harmony, and moderation. These initiatives are often constrained by bureaucratic mechanisms and limited budgets, particularly within FKUB structures. In contrast, civil society-led initiatives exhibit greater flexibility, with broader thematic orientations including human rights, gender equality, religious freedom, and multicultural citizenship. This dual structure creates distinct patterns of youth involvement in different cities.

This research was conducted in five cities across Indonesia: Padang, Mataram, Denpasar, Manado, and Yogyakarta. As the following sections describe, each of these urban areas reflects a unique configuration of interfaith youth engagement shaped by local sociopolitical dynamics.

Padang, West Sumatra

Prior to 2019, Padang lacked a dedicated interfaith youth forum initiated by either the Ministry of Religious Affairs or FKUB. Youth involvement in interreligious activities was limited to participation in state-organized events. A turning point came with the emergence of PELITA Padang, a civil society-based initiative established on November 10, 2019 (authors' interview with Angelique Maria Cuaca, head of PELITA Padang, Padang, October 11, 2023). Initially formed as a youth community, PELITA Padang evolved into an active organization promoting interfaith dialogue and cultural activism. Its activities are rooted in creative expression and advocacy for religious freedom, making it a pioneering space for youth-led interfaith collaboration in West Sumatra.

Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara

Mataram showcases a relatively robust network of interfaith youth forums. Three notable organizations include the Interfaith Youth Forum (FORELI), Alliance for Interfaith Youth Harmony (AKAPELA), and Youth Across Religions (MULIA). FORELI was established in 2006 by youth affiliated with Nusatenggara Centre (NC), aiming to connect religious youth groups such as *remaja masjid* (mosque youth), church youth, Indonesian Buddhist Student Association (HIKMAHBUDHI), and Hindu Dharma Indonesian Student Union (KMHDI). AKAPELA, founded in 2013 with support from the legal aid institution, LBH APIK NTB, focuses on interreligious tolerance and peace education (authors' interview with Suprpto, Research Associate at Nusa Tenggara Center, Mataram, April 29, 2023). Meanwhile, MULIA emerged from a youth leadership training on freedom of religion and belief, organized by the Journalists' Union for Diversity and Yayasan Satu Lentera Indonesia (authors' interview with Sardi, Head of MULIA NTB, Mataram, April 27, 2023). Together, these organizations reflect a vibrant civil society landscape that prioritizes both religious literacy and broader social justice issues.

Denpasar, Bali

In Denpasar, interfaith youth engagement is largely coordinated by Forum of the Interfaith Young Generation (FORGIMALA) under the guidance of FKUB. Officially launched on June 30, 2021, alongside Forum of Women Across Religions (FORPELA), FORGIMALA operates within state-led frameworks. Its primary activities include participating in religious literacy campaigns and institutional visits to houses of worship (authors' interview with Ida Bagus Subrahmaniam Saitya, Head of FORGIMALA Denpasar City, Denpasar, May 7, 2023). While its scope remains modest and closely aligned with government programming, FORGIMALA plays a foundational role in bridging religious youth communities in Bali.

Manado, North Sulawesi

In Manado, interfaith youth initiatives are relatively recent. The Forum for Youth Harmony Across Religions (FKPLA) Manado City was officially established on December 9, 2022, under FKUB's coordination. This youth forum seeks to promote dialogue and coexistence among young people from different religious backgrounds through structured activities (authors' interview with Aloysius Wilar, the secretary of FKUB Manado City, Manado, May 11, 2023). In addition, Manado is home to the Interfaith Student Exchange Forum of North Sulawesi (FPMLA), based in local universities. This student-led initiative emphasizes interfaith education, academic exchanges, and collaborative peace projects, reflecting Manado's reputation as a model city for religious harmony (authors' interview with Rahman Mantu, Mentor of the FPMLA, Manado, May 9, 2023).

Yogyakarta

Yogyakarta presents a hybrid model of interfaith youth engagement, combining government and civil society efforts. FKUB Muda (Youth FKUB) was initiated by the city's FKUB as a platform for youth from different faith backgrounds to foster interreligious unity (authors' interview with Afdhol Hakiki, the Head of FKUB Muda, Yogyakarta, October 3, 2023). Alongside this is Young Interfaith Peacemaker Community (YIPC), a nationally and internationally connected civil society movement founded in 2012. Emerging from the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies at Gadjah Mada University Yogyakarta, YIPC conducts interfaith trainings, youth peace camps, and advocacy work across Indonesia. Its chapter in Yogyakarta remains one of the most active and influential in the country.

The five cities studied in this research demonstrate diverse approaches to interfaith youth engagement, shaped by local sociopolitical dynamics and institutional support. While some initiatives emerge from government-backed structures such as FKUB, others are rooted in grassroots civil society efforts that allow for greater flexibility and innovation. These local variations

not only highlight the complexity of interfaith organizing in Indonesia but also inform the analysis in the following chapters, where the experiences, strategies, and challenges faced by youth communities in Padang, Mataram, Denpasar, Manado, and Yogyakarta are examined in depth. Understanding these contextual foundations is essential for interpreting the forms of religious literacy, peacebuilding, and cultural activism discussed in the subsequent sections.

Dialogical Literacy and Everyday Peacebuilding

In contemporary Indonesia, interfaith youth communities are emerging as significant actors in cultivating everyday peace through dialogical literacy. Rather than approaching interfaith engagement as rigid or programmatic, these communities emphasize relational encounters, shared experiences, and informal exchanges that transcend doctrinal boundaries. They embody what theorists like Mac Ginty (2014) refer to as everyday peacebuilding—practices rooted in ordinary, spontaneous, and personal interactions.

In Padang, the PELITA community exemplifies this ethos. Rather than staging formal dialogues or theological debates, PELITA creates natural spaces of encounter through shared experience—often in mundane yet intimate settings. Their approach is both affective and experiential. As Angelique Maria Cuaca, the head of PELITA Padang, noted:

PELITA believes that the space of encounter is not rigid or programmatic. It can take place naturally. For me, the process of getting to know someone does not have to be through interviews—it can happen through shared experience. When we experience things together, our relationships grow closer, and we can understand each other more fully (authors' interview, Padang, October 11, 2023).

Activities such as late-night discussions, spontaneous outings, or collaborative art projects become arenas for building trust and ethical solidarity. Here, religious literacy is not a matter of abstract knowledge but a mode of knowing shaped by emotional proximity and mutual vulnerability.

In Mataram, interfaith literacy takes on a different texture. While communities like MULIA NTB organize regular discussions, these often unfold through hospitality and storytelling. A striking example was a casual gathering at the home of Reverend Suwardi, who invited Muslim and Christian youth to a fish barbecue. The evening became a space to share personal narratives about religious discrimination and minority struggles. As observed:

This discussion was initiated by Reverend Suwardi, who invited us to grill fish and eat together, while exchanging stories about the challenges Christians face in obtaining

church permits in Mataram. He also spoke about the discrimination experienced by Christian children and youth in Muslim-majority neighborhoods and schools (authors' field note, participatory observation at Reverend Suwardi's house, Mataram, April 28, 2023).

Such gatherings blend the affective and political dimensions of religious literacy, where youth not only learn about each other's faiths but also co-witness each other's lived realities.

In Denpasar, the youth platform FORGIMALA reflects a top-down model of engagement. The forum was initiated by senior leaders in the local FKUB, and while it has established some interfaith youth presence, its programming remains dependent on external support and funding. As explained by its current coordinator: "Our forum was formed under the guidance of FKUB Denpasar, but we still lack independence in organizing our programs because of funding limitations" (authors' interview with Ida Bagus Subrahmaniam Saitya, Head of FORGIMALA Denpasar City, Denpasar, May 7, 2023). This situation illustrates the challenges of youth-led peacebuilding efforts when they remain embedded within institutional frameworks that may limit their spontaneity or innovation.

In Manado, efforts are further institutionalized but with a stronger emphasis on experiential religious learning. Through interfaith student exchange programs at State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Manado, Seminary College of Philosophy Pineleng, Don Bosco Pastoral College Tomohon, and Indonesian Christian University of Tomohon (UKIT), young people are invited not only to study the formal doctrines and histories of different religions but also to immerse themselves in religious practices outside their own tradition. As one IAIN Manado lecturer explained, "Besides learning about formal doctrines, history, and rituals of religions, students are also given the chance to see and feel the atmosphere of religious life different from their own" (authors' interview with Rahman Mantu, Lecturer at IAIN Manado, Manado, May 9, 2023). This experiential approach reinforces the emotional and ethical dimensions of religious literacy, allowing students to move beyond cognitive understanding into empathetic engagement.

In Yogyakarta, YIPC offers a more structured dialogical platform. Their activities range from thematic peace discussions and book/film talks to interfaith tours and scriptural reasoning (a method where youth from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim backgrounds read short verses from their scriptures together in small groups). This method provides a reflective and dialogical literacy that combines intellectual inquiry with spiritual humility. YIPC's model is pedagogically rigorous while remaining grounded in peer-to-peer learning and ethical imagination.

Across all five cities—Padang, Mataram, Denpasar, Manado, and Yogyakarta—a common thread emerges: these youth communities are reimagining religious

literacy not as mastery over religious facts, but as the ethical and emotional capacity to engage across differences. They are building what Stephen Duncombe (2002) might call “cultural resistance”: challenging dominant narratives of religious exclusivism through everyday acts of solidarity, hospitality, and shared meaning-making.

Despite their differences in structure, methods, and emphasis, these communities share a common aspiration—to live in peace through knowing, trusting, and caring for each other. As one activist from Padang simply put it: “We’re not here to debate religions. We’re here to live together.” (authors’ interview with Anjali Sabna, Member of PELITA Padang, Padang, October 11, 2023). In that spirit, dialogical literacy becomes a path to peace—not through consensus or sameness, but through the mutual recognition of difference and the shared hope for a plural and inclusive future.

Nurturing Religious Literacy: Youth Education and Training in Interfaith Contexts

Education and training have played a vital role in shaping religious literacy among interfaith youth communities in Indonesia. These activities go beyond the transmission of doctrinal or religious knowledge; they cultivate an empathetic understanding and the capacity to live respectfully and constructively within religiously plural societies. In many of the initiatives documented across Padang, Mataram, and Manado, education is approached as a process of transformation—one that forms not only knowledge but also character, relational sensitivity, and civic responsibility.

In Padang, PELITA has actively developed a range of training programs focused on youth engagement, religious freedom, and peacebuilding. One of the early structured training initiatives was the 2021 program titled *Membangun Gerakan Orang Muda untuk Perdamaian* (Building a Youth Movement for Peace), conducted virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over five days, young participants were introduced to foundational ideas on tolerance, freedom of religion or belief, and youth roles in sustaining social harmony. A follow-up workshop in July 2021 focused on “content creation for peace” and was held in person at the Mubarak Mosque. This session introduced participants to storytelling, digital advocacy, and social media strategies for promoting messages of peace and diversity. Following a session, a facilitator of the program explained to one of the authors in conversation, “We realize that young people speak through Instagram stories and TikTok now. If we want peace to be heard, we have to speak in their language.” The creative and adaptive nature of these training sessions reflects a deep understanding of youth culture and the digital landscape in which religious discourse often circulates.

In 2023, PELITA Padang expanded its training initiatives with a three-day youth workshop held July 7-9. The program included sessions on interfaith dialogue, youth leadership, human rights, and the intersection of religion and gender. These sessions were interactive, using case studies, small group discussions, and lived-experience testimonies. One participant recalled, “It was the first time I saw how religion and gender rights could be part of the same conversation. It changed how I think about justice.”

Beyond internal capacity-building, PELITA has partnered with local and national actors to offer public-facing educational events. These include the Workshop on Diversity Journalism in 2021, the Tanah Air Bhinneka youth forum in 2022, the Youth Climate Action Day, and participation in *Tahun Toleransi* (Tolerance Year) with Presidential Special Staff Ayu Kartika Dewi. While each event had its own thematic focus, they shared a common goal: to nurture a generation of young people who are literate in religious diversity, open to dialogue, and confident in expressing inclusive values in public spaces.

In Mataram, similar efforts have been led by youth-focused organizations such as FORELI, AKAPELA, and MULIA. FORELI, supported by the Nusatenggara Center, organizes seminars and training on youth radicalization, religious extremism, and nationalism. AKAPELA, an initiative of LBH APIK NTB, has introduced legal and human rights education into its programming, encouraging young people to see the connections between religious tolerance and broader questions of justice and gender equality. Since its founding in 2022, MULIA has carried out three rounds of training on freedom of religion or belief for university students and local activists, often in collaboration with national organizations such as the Journalists’ Union for Diversity and SALT Indonesia.

A MULIA coordinator shared in an interview with the authors, “We want our youth to not only understand their rights but also know how to defend the rights of others. For many, this is their first time hearing the phrase ‘freedom of religion or belief.’” These training spaces not only build knowledge but also encourage reflection, courage, and mutual respect among participants from different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

In Manado, the most sustained model of interfaith education is the Interfaith Student Exchange Program, which has roots going back to 1972. Initially a cooperation among Christian and Catholic theological seminaries, the program has since grown to include Muslim and Protestant institutions such as IAIN Manado and UKIT. Students from different religious colleges live together temporarily on one another’s campuses, participate in classes, and engage in dialogue with their peers.

A Muslim student from IAIN Manado who joined the program in 2022 described the experience in a follow-up interview with the authors, “I stayed in a Christian dormitory for a week. We prayed in different rooms, but ate at the same table. It was awkward at first, but it became a beautiful moment of friendship.”

The shared living and learning experience often leads to meaningful relationships that extend beyond the program itself.

In 2019, the program was hosted by UKIT's Faculty of Theology under the theme "Weaving Diversity to Strengthen Religious Solidarity." In 2022, the theme became "Religious Moderation as a Unifying Force," reflecting wider national discourses. Participants reported that the opportunity to engage in honest, respectful dialogue with those from other faiths helped reduce stereotypes and foster a deeper sense of shared citizenship. In 2023, students also visited the office of the GMIM Synod, adding a new institutional dimension to the program.

These various initiatives demonstrate that religious literacy cannot be cultivated through lectures alone. It requires lived experience, safe spaces for open dialogue, and carefully facilitated interactions where difference is not feared, but engaged with curiosity and respect. As one student from IAIN Manado put it in a follow-up interview with the authors, "It's not just about learning what other religions believe in. It's about learning how to live with them, how to talk, how to build trust—even when we disagree."

The future of interfaith relations in Indonesia will be shaped by how well these kinds of programs are supported, expanded, and adapted to the needs of young people. When youth are given the tools, language, and space to understand religious diversity as part of everyday life, they are more likely to become agents of peace and inclusion in their communities. Education and training, when done with sensitivity and creativity, can help reweave the social fabric of Indonesia in ways that honor both unity and difference.

Faith-Based Compassion: Social Involvement as a Practice of Religious Literacy

Interfaith youth communities in Indonesia have not limited their engagement to discussions, dialogues, and classroom-based learning. Their religious literacy has been cultivated and embodied through real acts of compassion, solidarity, and public service. Across various cities—especially in Padang and Mataram—young people from different religious backgrounds have taken part in numerous humanitarian actions that reflect not only a moral responsibility but also a deeply religious imperative to care for others, particularly in times of crisis.

In Padang, the youth interfaith community PELITA has frequently organized donation drives and public prayers in response to natural disasters and tragic events. These initiatives are more than just spontaneous reactions; they are deliberate actions rooted in an understanding of religious values such as mercy (*rahmah*), justice, and compassion. As one member of PELITA shared during an interview, "We believe helping others is not just social work. It's how we live out our faiths together. Every religion teaches love, so we try to make that love visible

to others, especially in hard times” (authors’ interview with Silmi Novita Nurman, member of PELITA, Padang, October 12, 2023).

This orientation was vividly seen during the public response to the crash of flight SJ-182 and the flood disaster in Solok. PELITA Padang launched a campaign titled “*Doa dan Donasi Bersama*” (Prayer and Collective Donation), which combined live acoustic performances, poetry readings, and interfaith prayers at Tugu Gempa—a public space that itself holds memories of past disasters. The event was attended by Muslims, Christians, and other faith groups, drawing attention from passersby, media, and even local authorities. “We wanted to show that praying and acting together are not separate things. We mourn, we act, and we heal together,” said one youth leader of the event (authors’ interview with Angelique Maria Cuaca, Head of PELITA, Padang, October 11, 2023).

Another action followed in response to floods in the IV Jurai subdistrict of Pesisir Selatan. In collaboration with the MDM Cooperative, PELITA conducted open donations, amplifying the message of shared responsibility beyond religious lines. A more symbolic yet powerful event was their response to the suicide bombing at the Cathedral Church in Makassar in 2021. Instead of retaliating with fear or silence, PELITA organized a virtual interfaith prayer night broadcasted live on YouTube, where participants read poems, expressed grief, and reaffirmed their collective rejection of violence. “That prayer session was not just for Makassar,” recalled one participant. “It was a declaration that we, as youth from different religions, are one family when facing terror and injustice.” (authors’ interview with Angelique Maria Cuaca, head of PELITA, Padang, October 11, 2023).

This embodiment of solidarity extended to economic creativity, such as in the PELITA Pondok Coffee initiative. Responding to the flood disaster in East Nusa Tenggara, PELITA opened a mobile coffee stall, donating all profits to affected families. In a society often polarized by political or religious narratives, such small acts hold transformative power. They convey a message that youth interfaith collaboration is not only possible—it is effective, creative, and deeply meaningful.

Environmental concern also became a space for interfaith collaboration. In 2022, the Youth Climate Action Day in Padang brought together over a dozen interfaith and environmental groups. Activities ranged from river clean-ups and tree planting to interfaith school visits and art therapy sessions. The event drew participants from the Christian community (HKBP), Hindu youth (PERADAH), Ahmadiyya Muslims (JAI), and others, all united under the theme, “the interfaith youth for environmental protection.” The collaboration showed how religious literacy is not confined to doctrinal knowledge but is embodied in values like stewardship (*khalifah*), care for creation, and justice for future generations.

The impact of these engagements has gone beyond material aid. They have become emotional and spiritual encounters that build empathy across lines of belief. They serve as informal classrooms of lived religion and mutual

understanding. As another youth interfaith member explained: “Before these events, I had never really spoken deeply with someone from a different religion. But when we planted trees together or helped flood victims, we didn’t see each other as different. We just saw each other as fellow human beings.” (authors’ interview with Karen Karista, member of PELITA, Padang, October 12, 2023).

In Mataram, the interfaith youth network AKAPELA has also taken part in disaster response efforts, such as sending aid to flood victims in Bima. While their initiatives may not be as publicized as PELITA’s, their consistent involvement in acts of solidarity reflects a growing pattern of religiously-motivated public service. However, in cities like Denpasar and Manado, such interfaith humanitarian actions remain limited, with most youth activities coordinated under formal government structures like FKUB or the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This suggests the need for more autonomous and youth-led spaces where compassion-driven action can flourish organically.

The convergence of humanitarian concern and religious literacy shows that education alone is insufficient without practice. As these youth demonstrate, understanding other religions is not only about knowing what others believe, but also about walking together in shared pain and hope. Through joint action, interfaith youth communities are writing a new chapter in the story of religion in Indonesia—one where faith inspires unity, and where diversity is lived out in acts of care.

Ultimately, these initiatives signal a shift: from religious literacy as intellectual knowledge to religious literacy as social praxis. The lived experiences of these young people challenge the dominant narratives of religious division and offer instead a grassroots vision of peaceful coexistence—rooted not just in tolerance, but in love-in-action.

Youth Agency in Peacebuilding Through Interfaith Religious Literacy

Youth engagement in peacebuilding and religious literacy in Indonesia reveals a dynamic interplay between affirmation of existing theories and the emergence of new perspectives. In a pluralistic society like Indonesia—home to the world’s largest Muslim population and a rich mosaic of religious traditions—interfaith youth activism offers valuable insights into how young people contribute to social cohesion and religious harmony beyond state-centric and institutionalized frameworks.

The literature has increasingly moved away from portraying youth merely as passive victims or potential perpetrators of conflict, instead highlighting their capacity as active agents of peace (Felice and Wisler 2007; Drummond-Mundal and Cave 2007; Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015; Nilan and Wibawanto

2024). Our findings affirm this shift. Indonesian youth involved in interfaith communities are not only promoting tolerance but also actively shaping discourses and practices of coexistence. Their everyday interactions, from organizing interfaith discussions to conducting communal service activities, exemplify what Mac Ginty (2014, 2017) calls “everyday peacebuilding”—peace that emerges through informal, habitual, and often unnoticed acts of cooperation.

In this regard, the findings resonate with Cardozo et al. (2015), who conceptualize youth agency as a “maneuvering space”—a fluid and context-dependent arena in which young people navigate sociopolitical constraints and opportunities. Despite limited financial resources and minimal recognition from institutional actors, many youth-led interfaith groups in Indonesia demonstrate strong organizational autonomy and moral clarity in addressing issues of intolerance and religious discrimination. Their agency is not only expressed through formal dialogue but also through creative problem-solving, collaborative learning, and grassroots education.

However, these findings also challenge conventional understandings of religious literacy. While often interpreted narrowly as doctrinal knowledge or scriptural familiarity, the youth in this study conceptualize and practice religious literacy relationally—through empathy, listening, and civic responsibility. Their approach suggests that religious literacy is most effective when embedded in lived experience and social engagement, supporting broader arguments within the literature that stress the importance of contextual, dialogic, and socially embedded forms of religious understanding (Lindheim 2020; Chan and Jafralie 2021; Wolfart 2022).

The findings also highlight a tension between state-endorsed interfaith mechanisms—such as FKUB—and grassroots youth-led initiatives. While FKUB and similar institutions offer formal platforms for interreligious dialogue, they often limit the depth of engagement by promoting harmony over critical reflection. In contrast, youth-led interfaith communities tend to operate with more flexibility, inclusivity, and responsiveness to local contexts. This confirms critiques within the literature that argue for the need to decentralize peacebuilding efforts and empower local, non-hierarchical structures (Smith and Smith Ellison 2012; Izzi 2013). Another significant insight from this research relates to the under-recognition of youth contributions. Although youth consistently demonstrate leadership in peacebuilding activities, their efforts are often rendered invisible in formal peace agendas, echoing earlier concerns that youth participation remains largely symbolic unless supported by meaningful inclusion in program design and decision-making processes (McEvoy-Levy 2011; Wahyuni and Karlina 2024).

Taken together, these findings affirm the relevance of existing theories on youth peacebuilding and religious literacy, while also pointing to the need for more nuanced, context-sensitive frameworks. Indonesian youth are not merely passive recipients of religious tolerance narratives—they are active constructors

of interfaith solidarity and everyday peace. Their contributions challenge the dominant top-down approaches and call for greater recognition of youth-led, relational, and embodied practices of religious literacy as vital to building inclusive and sustainable peace in plural societies.

Conclusion

This study highlights the pivotal role of religious literacy in empowering youth as active agents of peacebuilding in religiously diverse societies. Drawing on empirical insights from five cities in Indonesia, it becomes clear that interfaith youth communities serve not merely as participants but as initiators of constructive interreligious dialogue and collaboration. Their efforts demonstrate that religious literacy is more than just knowledge of doctrines; it is a dynamic capacity that enables young people to cultivate empathy, challenge stereotypes, and engage meaningfully across lines of belief. Rather than conforming to narrow depictions of youth as victims or instigators of conflict, these actors reclaim their space as bridge-builders, navigating local tensions with a unique blend of cultural awareness and moral commitment. Their agency is both responsive and adaptive—shaped by sociopolitical challenges yet rooted in a vision of inclusive coexistence that resonates deeply within pluralistic settings.

Beyond Indonesia, the findings of this research offer important implications for global efforts in peacebuilding and civic engagement. In an era marked by rising identity-based conflicts and polarization, the integration of religious literacy into youth programming provides a promising approach to cultivating more resilient and empathetic communities. Policymakers and practitioners should consider how youth-led, interfaith initiatives can be supported institutionally—whether through education, funding mechanisms, or policy frameworks—to scale their impact in other multicultural societies. Moreover, this study invites further scholarly exploration into the intersections between youth, religion, and peacebuilding across various cultural and religious contexts. The capacity of young people to act as agents of transformative change through everyday, localized efforts underscores the need to reimagine peacebuilding not only as a top-down political process, but also as a participatory and relational endeavor led by communities themselves.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the Research Grant Program of the State Islamic University Sjech M. Djamil Djambek Bukittinggi, Indonesia, under the BOPTN scheme (Grant No. B-097.3/Un.26/TL.02/01/2023).

References

- Ashraf, Muhammad Azeem. 2019. "Exploring the Potential of Religious Literacy in Pakistani Education." *Religions* 10 (7): 429. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10070429>.
- Berents, Helen, and Siobhan McEvoy-Levy. 2015. "Theorising Youth and Everyday Peace(Building)." *Peacebuilding* 3 (2): 115–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2015.1052627>.
- Cardozo, Mieke T. A. Lopes, Sean Higgins, Elisabeth Maber, Cyril O. Brandt, Nebil Kusmallah, and Marielle Le Mat. 2015. "Literature Review: Youth Agency, Peacebuilding and Education." <http://learningforpeace.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Youth-Literature-Review-May15.pdf> (accessed November 3, 2025).
- Chan, W. Y. Alice, and Sabrina Jafralie. 2021. "Civic Religious Literacy as a Form of Global Citizenship Education: Three Examples from Practitioner Training in Canada." In *Centering Global Citizenship Education in the Public Sphere*, 16. [taylorfrancis.com. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003089551-9](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003089551-9).
- Dinham, Adam, Matthew Francis, and Martha Shaw. 2017. "Towards a Theory and Practice of Religious Literacy: A Case Study of Religion and Belief Engagement in a UK University." *Religions* 8 (12): 276. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8120276>.
- Dinham, Adam, and Martha Shaw. 2017. "Religious Literacy through Religious Education: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief." *Religions* 8 (7). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8070119>.
- Drummond-Mundal, Lori, and Guy Cave. 2007. "Young Peacebuilders: Exploring Youth Engagement with Conflict and Social Change." *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 3 (3): 63–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2007.620722997322>.
- Duncombe, Stephen. 2002. *Cultural Resistance Reader*. London: Verso.
- Felice, Celina Del, and Andria Wisler. 2007. "The Unexplored Power and Potential of Youth as Peace-Builders." *Journal of Peace Conflict & Development*, Issue, No. 11: 1–29.
- Ginty, Roger Mac. 2014. "Everyday Peace: Bottom-up and Local Agency in Conflict-Affected Societies." *Security Dialogue* 45 (6): 548–64.
- Ginty, Roger Mac. 2017. "Peacekeeping and Data." *International Peacekeeping* 24 (5): 695–705. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2017.1383561>.
- Halafoff, Anna, Andrew Singleton, Gary Bouma, and Mary Lou Rasmussen. 2020. "Religious Literacy of Australia's Gen Z Teens: Diversity and Social Inclusion." *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 41 (2): 195–213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2019.1698862>.
- Hannam, Patricia, Gert Biesta, Sean Whittle, and David Aldridge. 2020. "Religious Literacy: A Way Forward for Religious Education?" *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 41 (2): 214–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2020.1736969>.
- Izzi, Valeria. 2013. "Just Keeping Them Busy? Youth Employment Projects as a Peacebuilding Tool." *International Development Planning Review* 35 (2): 103–17. <https://doi.org/10.3828/idpr.2013.8>.
- Lindheim, T. 2020. "Developing Religious Literacy through Conversational Spaces for Religion in the Workplace." *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1890-7008-2020-01-02>.
- McEvoy-Levy, Siobhán. 2011. "Children, Youth and Peacebuilding." In *Critical Issues in Peace and Conflict Studies: Theory, Practice and Pedagogy*, edited by Thomas Matyok,

- Jessica Senehi, and Sean Byrne, 159–76. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative Data Analysis*. 2nd Edition. California: SAGE Publications.
- Moore, Diane L. 2015. "Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach." *World History Connected* 4 (1): 1–14. <https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiuinois.edu/4.1/moore.html> (accessed November 3, 2025).
- Nilan, Pam, and Gregorius Ragil Wibawanto. 2024. "Religion and Youth Activism for Viability in Indonesia." *Journal of Youth Studies*, November, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2431868>.
- Nowell, Lorelli S., Jill M. Norris, Deborah E. White, and Nancy J. Moules. 2017. "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>.
- Prothero, Stephen. 2007. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn't*. New York: HarperCollin.
- Ragandang, Primitivo Cabanes. 2020. "Social Media and Youth Peacebuilding Agency: A Case From Muslim Mindanao." *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 15 (3): 348–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1542316620957572>.
- Seiple, Chris, and Dennis R Hoover. 2021. "A Case for Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 19 (1): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1874165>.
- Smith, Alan, and Christine Smith Ellison. 2012. *Youth, Education, and Peacebuilding*. Coleraine: UNESCO Center.
- Sofjan, D. 2020. "Learning about Religions: An Indonesian Religious Literacy Program as a Multifaith Site for Mutual Learning." *Religions*. <https://www.mdpi.com/806236> (accessed November 3, 2025).
- Stirling, K. Caileigh. 2024. "5 Facts about Muslims and Christians in Indonesia." Washington, D.C. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/28/5-facts-about-muslims-and-christians-in-indonesia/> (accessed November 3, 2025).
- Suhadi, and Utami Sandyarani. 2022. "International and Local Actor Collaborations to Prevent Violent Extremism Among Youth in Indonesia: Initiatives and Effectiveness." In *Countering Violent and Hateful Extremism in Indonesia*, edited by Greg Barton, Mateo Vergani, and Yenny Wahid, 125–43. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-2032-4_6.
- Taufik, Zulfan. 2019. "The Youth and The Primacy against Religious Radicalism through the Organization of Mahasiswa Ahlith Thariqah Al Mu'tabarrah An Nahdliyyah (MATAN) in Indonesia." *TEOSOFI: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 9 (1): 109–30. <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2019.9.1.109-130>.
- Taufik, Zulfan. 2020. "From Negative to Positive Peace: Strengthening the Role of Youth in Religious Peacebuilding in Bukittinggi, West Sumatra." *AKADEMIKA: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 25 (2): 257–76. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.32332/akademika.v25i2.2132>.
- Tomalin, Emma, Jörg Haustein, and Shabaana Kidy. 2019. "Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals." Edited by Simon Dalby. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17 (2): 102–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2019.1608664>.
- Wahyuni, Dwi, and Intan Karlina. 2024. "Digital Activism for Peace: Exploring Instagram's Role in Interfaith Dialogue in Indonesia." *FUADUNA : Jurnal Kajian Keagamaan Dan Kemasyarakatan* 8 (2): 110–23. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.30983/fuaduna>.

v8i2.8719.

- Wolfart, J. C. 2022. "Religious Literacy": Some Considerations and Reservations." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*. https://brill.com/view/journals/mtsr/34/5/article-p407_1.xml?alreadyAuthRedirecting (accessed November 3, 2025).
- Zuhdi, Muhammad, and Sarwenda Sarwenda. 2020. "Recurring Issues in Indonesia's Islamic Education: The Needs for Religious Literacy." *Analisa: Journal of Social Science and Religion* 5 (01): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.18784/analisa.v5i1.1038>.

Zulfan Taufik is an associate professor in the Department of Aqidah and Islamic Philosophy at State Islamic University Sjech M. Djamil Djambek Bukittinggi, Indonesia. His research encompasses a broad range of interdisciplinary topics, including Islamic theology, philosophy, and the rights of religious minorities. His most recent publication is "Sharia-based Custom and the Politics of Religious Freedom in Contemporary West Sumatra, Indonesia," published in *Journal of Southeast Asian Human Rights*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2024). Email: zulfantaufik@uinbukittinggi.ac.id

Vivi Yulia Nora is a lecturer at the Department of Sociology of Religion at State Islamic University Sjech M. Djamil Djambek, Indonesia, specializing in the sociology of religion. Since 2023, she has served as the editor of the *Belief Journal*. In 2023, she published an article titled "Positive and Negative Excesses of Online Games among Muslim Adolescents in Tanah Datar, West Sumatra" in *Jurnal FUADUNA*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2023). Email: viviyulianora@uinbukittinggi.ac.id

Mardian Sulistyati is a researcher at the Institute of Southeast Asian Islam at State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Her research interests broadly include ecofeminism, gender and sexual diversity, and religious minorities. The publication of two book chapters about gender and sexuality are forthcoming, as is a book manuscript about the agrarian pesantren-style ecofeminism movement, based on her eight years of field research. Additional publications can be found at <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mardian-Sulistyati>. Email: mardian.sulistyati@gmail.com

Submitted: October 10, 2024; Revised: June 27, 2025; Accepted: July 29, 2025