



## ***Building Peacebuilders: Assessing the Impact of a Capacity-Building Initiative on Students at the University of Dohuk***

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### **Abstract**

Conflict resolution in post-conflict societies constitutes one of our world's most pressing issues. Too frequently, peacebuilding gets imposed from the outside, disregarding the profound heterogeneity of local populations and their extensive expertise. This means that sometimes social cohesion does not develop; instead, it creates wounds and undermines morale. This underlines the importance of proper valuation of peacebuilding efforts. As a microcosm of society, the university context provides the opportunity to enable peacebuilding skills based on local knowledge. Thus, through a case study in the University of Duhok, this paper sheds light on two significant issues: first, the potential of university campuses to provide space and resources for development of conflict resolution strategies and, second, how innovative methods can improve students' peacebuilding capacities.

This paper focuses on the short- and long-term effects of a university-led peacebuilding initiative to enhance students' capabilities in implementing projects related to social cohesion. The research utilised a mixed-methods approach, including pre- and post-assessments, focus groups, interviews, and observations, to evaluate knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, skills, and relationship changes.

The findings show significant positive outcomes in all these areas, with participants reporting improved conflict resolution abilities, empathy, and interpersonal skills. While the project cultivated a strong sense of community, some challenges in maintaining long-term collaboration arose. Thus, the study highlights the need for continuous support to maximize project impact and to guide future peacebuilding efforts.

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**بناء صناع السلام: تقييم أثر مبادرة بناء القدرات على الطلاب في جامعة دهوك**  
**مأمون عبد الصمد محمد<sup>\*1</sup>**

## المستخلص :

ريتشارد رايت (١٩٠٨-١٩٦٠) ، الروائي الأمريكي من أصل أفريقي، قدم مساهمات كبيرة في الأدب الأمريكي، خصوصاً في استكشافه لقضايا العرق، الهوية، والظلم الاجتماعي. أعماله غالباً ما تصور شخصيات تكافح مع الخوف، والغضب، والإحباط بسبب الفقر، والعنصرية، والفصل العنصري. من خلال تصويراته الحية للاضطهاد، يدرس رايت كيف تؤدي هذه الصعوبات إلى استجابة الشخصيات الأمريكية من أصل أفريقي بالعنف والانحراف.

رواية رايت الشهيرة "ابن الوطن" (١٩٤٠) تتناول العلاقة بين الطموحات الفردية والقيود الاجتماعية في شيكاغو خلال ثلاثينيات القرن الماضي. تسلط الضوء على الظلم العنصري الذي يواجهه الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي في مجتمع جيم كرو، وهو واقع عايشه رايت بنفسه. من خلال شخصية بيجر توماس، تستكشف الرواية كيف تشكل الرغبات الشخصية والضغط البيئية الأفعال والاختيارات، موضحة تعقيدات الحالة الإنسانية.

تطبق هذه الدراسة أسلوب تحليلي وصفي باستخدام نظرية الضغط العام (GST) لتحليل التفاعل بين الرغبة، والضغط، والانحراف في رواية "ابن الوطن". تركز الدراسة على كيفية تأثير الرغبات المحبطة لدى بيجر، المتأثرة بالعنصرية المنهجية والقيود الاجتماعية، على ظهور الضغوط التي تؤدي إلى سلوك انحرافي. تسعى الدراسة للإجابة على كيفية تأثير الرغبات غير المحققة لدى بيجر في ضغطه وتصرفاته الإجرامية، وكيف تقدم نظرية الضغط العام (GST) رؤى حول دوافعه في سياق الاضطهاد المنهجي.

تُظهر النتائج أن هناك ثلاثة مصادر رئيسية للضغط في حياة بيجر — وهي عدم قدرته على تحقيق الأهداف المعنوية، فقدان تلك الأهداف، والتعرض للمحفزات السلبية — والتي تثير مشاعر سلبية كبيرة. هذه المشاعر السلبية، مثل الخوف، والغضب، والإحباط، تدفع بيجر إلى الانخراط في سلوكيات عنيفة وانحرافية كوسيلة للتعامل مع ظروفه.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** العرق، الرغبة، الإجهاد، الجنون، الاضطهاد المنهجي

## 1. Introduction

Rebuilding relations after conflict can take years, even generations if resentments are exacerbated. Peacebuilding can provide critical strategies for addressing conflict and thus promoting social cohesion, enabling long-term cooperation and harmony between diverse groups. However, such strategies must be locally-owned and build on local knowledge. In Iraqi Kurdistan, this is especially important due to the broad diversity of people with very different needs and beliefs, as well as resentments persisting from previous conflicts. While there have been several peacebuilding initiatives in the area, there are significant gaps in our means of evaluating their long-term impacts. Many peacebuilding programs require more rigorous assessments than currently available, raising questions about their effectiveness and sustainability (Paffenholz & Reyhler, 2007).

Drawing on qualitative interview data from the case study, this study aims to move beyond speculative scholarship on university-based peacebuilding and contribute evidence-based knowledge regarding its short- and longer-term impacts. As such, it aspires to enhance the increasing comprehension of peacebuilding evaluation and guide subsequent programs in Iraqi Kurdistan and beyond.

This paper provides evidence-based insights into the effectiveness of university-based peacebuilding programs by examining both short-term and long-term outcomes of the case study training course, 'Building Youth Capacity to Engage Meaningfully in Social Cohesion Initiatives', run by the Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies (CPCRS) of the University of Duhok, Iraqi Kurdistan in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Context in Iraqi Kurdistan and the University of Duhok

The promotion of social cohesion in diverse communities, including IDP communities, is a complex challenge. Social cohesion between students at the University of Duhok reflects the broader

<sup>1</sup> This project was funded by the Mennonite Central Committee.

challenges facing society in the Kurdistan Region. Here, social cohesion means that all groups, including IDPs, coexist in a stable community. However, we need to know how to promote such cohesion and here intergroup contact theory provides solutions through promoting positive contact.<sup>1</sup>

With approximately 23,000 students from different backgrounds, the University of Duhok provides an important site to examine social cohesion. Alongside diversity, signs of social fragmentation had been observed as groups have emerged among students, based on ethnic, religious and socially economic background. Testimonies and observations have shown that many students face discrimination, in particular, Yezidi students, who still receive little empathy and understanding among the student body.

The widespread nature of social divisions among University of Duhok students indicates that there is a need to implement significant steps to enhance social cohesion. In this regard, the university could play a pivotal role in building a more united and inclusive community by implementing strategies that promote intergroup contact and understanding. Moreover, many University of Dohuk students strongly desire practical learning experience in peace and conflict studies, internships, leadership training, and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Experiences of training programs, research and roundtable meetings with communities conducted by the CPCRS, support the claim that there are tensions between host communities and IDPs in Iraqi Kurdistan. They found that, although there were cases of social cohesion, especially after the initial arrival of IDPs, over time, latent conflict and resentment grows between these communities and need to be proactively addressed.<sup>2</sup>

The project focused on here aimed to tackle these issues by equipping participants with essential conflict resolution, communication, and active listening skills. Through intensive workshops and practical training, participants were supported in developing mediation capabilities and learnt to design and implement community initiatives tailored to the local community. The ultimate goal was to foster a culture of peace and positive change within the university and the broader community.

After defining the research question, this article explains the importance of local ownership of projects and three concepts basic to such initiatives. It then highlights the more significant obstacles to social cohesion in Iraqi Kurdistan, before outlining the specifics of the project being studied and its findings.

### **3. Research Question**

The following question was posed to guide and clarify the research: What are the short and long-term impacts of a university-based peacebuilding project on participants, including changes in knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, skills, and relationships?

#### **3.1 Aims and Objectives**

The research objective was to evaluate a project for enhancing peacebuilding capacities, identifying its short and long-term impact on participants, including the following:

- The impact of the training on students' skill and knowledge acquisition.

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<sup>1</sup> Intergroup Contact Theory, proposed by Thomas F. Pettigrew, contends that when individuals from different groups have positive contact under certain conditions, such as equal status, common goals, and cooperation, they develop positive attitudes towards each other, leading to reduced prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination, and increased understanding. See Pettigrew, T. F. (1998). 'Intergroup Contact Theory'. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 49, 65–85.

<sup>2</sup> Sadeeq and Wayne. "Community Dialogues for Social Cohesion: Reflective Analysis of Lessons Learned from IDPs and Host Communities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq." *PREP Occasional Paper Series*. No 1. 2019.

- Short-term impact on students' attitudes, behaviours and knowledge related to peacebuilding and conflict resolution.
- The effect on students' careers, community service work, and peace process participation in Iraqi Kurdistan.
- To identify the problems and potential of implementing such projects in post-conflict settings.
- To recommend ways to improve the design and delivery of future peacebuilding capacity programmes.

### ***3.2 Significance of the Study for Iraqi Kurdistan***

This research is promising because it generates much information regarding peacebuilding/conflict-resolution that can be applied in Iraqi Kurdistan. Specifically, the following:

**Reinforcing community resilience:** The training will better equip students in managing and resolving conflict through peaceful means and so contribute towards a more resilient and peaceful society.

**Empowering youth:** This research will help in orienting a new generation of peacebuilders who operate within the universities and thereby perhaps changing the landscape for youth roles more generally, fermenting peaceful change in Iraqi Kurdistan.

**Contribution to the Literature:** This study will fill an important gap in the literature by presenting new information on sustainability of peacebuilding-capacity programs.

**Evidence for policy and practice:** The findings can also contribute towards more effective policy formulation and practice in peacebuilding interventions by governments, NGOs and other stakeholders.

## **4. Literature Review**

There is scarce literature on peacebuilding capacities in post-conflict contexts, particularly in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the long-term effects of a university-based peacebuilding project.

Historically, it has been not easy to measure the success of peacebuilding efforts. Stave (2011:1) points out the challenge in determining whether 'peace has been built,' as there is often a need for concrete evidence or agreed-upon standards. As a result, early peacebuilding projects often needed more comprehensive evaluation components, so, their effectiveness needed clarification (Life and Peace Institute, 2008). Imas and Rist (2009) argue that evaluation is crucial for determining project progress, identifying beneficiaries, and assessing impact. Evaluating policies, programs and projects can help organisations to allocate resources more effectively, enhance accountability and create useful knowledge. As noted by Paffenholz and Reyhler (2007), evaluations can also uncover negative, unintended consequences of peacebuilding or what Evans *et al* refer to as detrimental effects. This enables organisations to adapt their strategies and become more effective while fostering a positive impact.

In addition, scholars such as Lederach (1997) emphasize the importance of local ownership and capacity-building as the foundation for sustained peace. Here, we provide locals with the support to design and implement their own peacebuilding projects. This study explores whether grassroots approaches have a potential role to play in addressing local challenges.

### ***Local ownership of peacebuilding efforts***

Local ownership means that peacebuilding activities need to be informed by local people rather than by international needs, priorities and context (Baranyi, 2008, p. 312). This is widely acknowledged, but implementing this principle is difficult (Wilén and Chapaux, 2011, p. 532). Post-conflict societies often lack organised structures to articulate needs and are often in chaos. Consequently, well-resourced and organised international entities often impose their own agendas. The international entities need time to operationalise; the local communities lack momentum, resources and belief in theories of change proposed by international communities. Most peacebuilding programs are short and need quick results to be funded. Moreover, they often oversimplify the importance of knowing the local context and cultural struggle for peacebuilding effectiveness (Hughes, 2012).

Scholars indicate the potential dangers of imposing external models on societies without considering their existing structures and capacities. Their findings suggest that well-intentioned interventions can sometimes have unintended negative consequences, leading to the erosion of local systems and the creation of new, less effective ones (Berdal and Wennmann, 2010, p. 8). In particular, imposing new models can erase the knowledge, skills and systems that local communities have developed over time. It also makes the local communities unmotivated and dependent on external expertise, so consequently they struggle and need help with the development of self-confidence and ownership. Therefore, building upon existing social structures and capacities is essential when implementing change or development initiatives. It suggests a more organic and participatory approach, focusing on strengthening and transforming what already exists rather than imposing entirely new systems.

Thus, given the regional complexities of conflict in Iraqi Kurdistan, the lack of current scholarship suggests the urgent need for further studies that can ensure peacebuilding initiatives are fit-for-purpose. Research supporting vigorous evaluations can strengthen future peacebuilding by broadening the evidence base while rooting these in local realities and knowledge, thus, improving project performance and therefore enabling greater scope for resourcing. Given the violent history of the region, work promoting peace and reconciliation is vital.

## **5. Contextual definition of the concepts**

Before continuing, it is useful to explain three relevant concepts that can sometimes be misunderstood; in particular, Peacebuilding, Community Development Initiatives and Social Cohesion. These concepts circumscribe and illuminate the purpose of the project and are essential to establishing a peace that can be self-perpetuating.

### ***a. Peacebuilding***

Galtung, a highly respected peace researcher, asserts that peace is a never-ending dynamic process (Galtung, 1996, p. 265). Hence, it becomes both the goal and the process (Cox, 1976, p. 12). Moreover, Galtung (1969) distinguishes between negative peace (absence of direct violence) and positive peace (presence of justice, equality and well-being). Positive peace is the ultimate goal, representing a society where structures, culture, and individuals are oriented towards harmonious coexistence. Galtung's perspective offers a comprehensive understanding of peace as a multi-faceted concept. His approach highlights the importance of addressing both direct and underlying forms of violence to achieve lasting peace<sup>1</sup> while emphasising the ongoing nature of peacebuilding efforts that require constant attention and adaptation.

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<sup>1</sup> Lasting peace is a state that is free from strife over a long period. It implies a resolution of roots causes of conflict, a commitment to peaceful resolution of future conflicts, and the establishment of strong mechanisms to prevent the recurrence of conflict.

Meanwhile, complementing this, Lederach (1997: 20) provides a comprehensive definition of peacebuilding, highlighting its dynamic and multifaceted nature. Since its inception, Lederach has noted that peacebuilding is broader than post-collapse reconstruction and encompasses a range of pre- and post-peace activities. Once again, peacebuilding is not considered a destination but a dynamic transformational process and one that requires the involvement of local people. Additionally, his approach focuses on cultivating good and sustainable relations between warring factions while promoting competencies and capacities for prevention of conflicts, as well as their resolution. Along with Lederach's concepts of engaging local communities, Mac Ginty (2011) states that peacebuilding is an externally-resourced and locally-owned process. While outside support can certainly be beneficial, it should be limited by the understanding that bottom-up peacebuilding is essential and local communities are perfectly capable of developing indigenous ways of resolving conflict.

In short, peacebuilding is all what is done to convert conflict into durable peace; it comprises different kinds of activities. It demands a comprehensive strategy that goes to the heart of the matter. This is especially true for Iraq, but even more so for the particularly ruinous post-conflict situation in Kurdish northern Iraq where diversity dictates a differently-oriented approach.

#### ***a. Community Development Initiatives***

Community development is a participatory process that enables inhabitants of an area to make choices and pursue their own varying interests together. It has a broader scope, looking at social economic and environmental issues with the aim of building community capacity for self-governance (International Development Department, 2009: 8-9). Hence, it provides the community with some power and assurance over their own issues along with keeping them in the loop regarding decision-making and executing those decisions. Thus, this method creates enduring solutions to root issues concerning confrontation.

Moreover, it is a needs-based, top-down approach that prioritises identifying and addressing a community's deficiencies or problems. It often involves external experts conducting assessments and surveys to determine the community's needs, which are then used to develop intervention programs. This approach is focused on providing external resources and support to help the community overcome its challenges (Phillips, 2009, p. 39). This asset-based strategy focuses on identifying and utilising a community's strengths rather than solely addressing its weaknesses. Thus, this approach fosters sustainability and ownership within the community (Killing 2008: 8-9).

#### ***A. Social cohesion***

Social cohesion is a multifaceted and multidisciplinary concept that eludes precise definition and its meaning can differ across countries and organisations depending on varying social, cultural and political contexts. It is a major focus in both academic and policy realms. Research from various social sciences elucidates the complexity of defining social cohesion. However, while academics seek a comprehensive framework to provide an understanding of the issues involved, policy issues aimed at improving social cohesion are more context-specific (Rajulton et al., 2006).

Green and Janmaat provide a comprehensive understanding of social cohesion from two aspects: social and institutional. The first includes shared values, common goals, sense of belonging, common identity, tolerance, respect, interpersonal and institutional trust, civic cooperation, active civic participation, and adherence to societal rules and norms. Meanwhile, institutional aspects include institutions for sharing risk, providing social protection, equal opportunities and conflict resolution mechanisms (Green and Janmaat, 2011: 6). However, Chan *et al.* offer a more comprehensive approach that includes other components of social cohesion. These are the vertical and horizontal interactions involved (both formal and informal mechanisms), attitudes and norms (shared values, beliefs, and expectations that guide behaviour),

as well as trust, sense of belonging, participation, and helping to foster cooperation and solidarity, and behavioural manifestations (Chan et al., 2006: 273).

Several scholars have identified different methodologies for measuring social cohesion; for example, Laurence (2009:72) includes membership in community and civic groups, interpersonal trust, attachment to neighbourhoods, social ties, and levels of reciprocity. This can be challenging because a range of factors—such as culture, history, and economic conditions—influence social cohesion. There is also the issue of trust and its difficulty to operationalise. The availability of data and its limitations, significantly affect our understanding of social cohesion especially at the community level. Thus, the approach requires multi-level perspectives, particularly so in a country like Iraqi Kurdistan.

## **6. Obstacles to Social Cohesion in Kurdistan**

The primary obstacles to social cohesion in Kurdistan can be categorised as follows:

Historical Trauma and Distrust:

- **Past conflicts:** The legacy of violence, particularly from the era of ISIS, has led to deep-rooted distrust and animosity among different communities, especially between Muslims and Yezidis, and—to a lesser extent—Christians. **Accusations of complicity against the Sunni community:** The perception of certain groups being complicit in past atrocities has worsened divisions and hindered reconciliation.

### **Demographic Changes and Resource Competition:**

- **Population displacement:** The demographic landscape has been transformed by the arrival of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, resulting in tensions regarding land ownership, resources and job opportunities.<sup>1</sup>
- **Unequal access to resources:** The control of territory and resources by specific groups has created disparities and fuelled resentment among marginalised communities. This is occurring in disputed territories and has affected the IDPs in Kurdistan.
- **Cultural identity:** Rapid demographic shifts have challenged cultural identities and social cohesion, as different groups compete for recognition and influence. Elders of minority groups complain about changes in culture and traditions influenced by the culture of the hosted communities.

Economic Inequality and Insecurity:

- **Job displacement:** The competition for jobs between host communities and displaced populations has increased economic hardships and social tensions.
- **Exploitation of vulnerable populations:** IDPs and refugees are often subjected to exploitation due to their precarious situation, further exacerbating social inequalities. IDPs and refugees are often exploited due to their precarious situation, which further exacerbates social inequalities.

## **7. Outline of the Project**

### **a. The Implementer**

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<sup>1</sup> For further information, see S. Kamal and Z. Sadeeq, 'Syrian Youth Refugees and the Labor Market in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Case Study of Duhok City'. In eds. Alexander Munoz and Thomas Hill, *Finding peace in Iraq Vol 2*. Center for Global Affairs, School of Professional Studies, New York University. 2014.

The CPCRS has a strong track record in implementing peacebuilding and youth empowerment projects in the Kurdistan region. With particular emphasis on strengthening the capabilities of youth to mitigate social cohesion challenges through community projects, CPCRS has managed successful partnerships with organisations such as New York University and GOAL Global.

Over 80 youths have been inspired as peacebuilding-project leaders, with dozens of community-based initiatives that counteract the negative narrative and strengthen social cohesion within communities, along with a working organisational structure including a code of conduct and anti-harassment policies.

Importantly, the CPCRS trainers are local with international training and research credentials. This expertise further deepens the organisation's ability to design impact assessments of peace-based capacity-building interventions on social cohesion within the Kurdistan Region.

## **b. Program description**

### ***Conflict Resolution Skills Training***

The three-day conflict-resolution training was designed to provide the participants with core concepts and useful tools. It included exercises involving a wide range of topics including definitions of conflict, identity, diversity, multiculturalism, social cohesion, dialogue, communication and active listening. Participants engaged via group discussions, personal experience shares and homework. Underlying the overall effort the project aimed to ensure that students were aware of conflict-resolution ideas and principles as groundwork for community-based action.

The overall project involved two three-day training sessions aiming to enhance the capacity of 40 student participants to contribute to social cohesion initiatives. The specific aim was to support them in developing community initiatives by equipping them with the necessary skills to identify community needs, design effective initiatives, and implement these skills successfully within the university campus. These involved the following:

- Defining community initiatives, distinguishing them from advocacy, and exploring examples within the university context.
  - Understanding the root causes of conflict using tools like Galtung's ABC triangle and conflict mapping.<sup>1</sup>
  - Identifying and prioritising community needs through group discussions and presentations.
  - Developing SMART goals, considering project feasibility, and utilising a peace tree framework.
  - Learning about project management, monitoring, and evaluation techniques.
- Adhering to a code of conduct, minimising harm and developing contingency plans.
- The training utilised a participatory approach, encouraging groupwork, discussions, and practical exercises. Participants applied what they had learned by developing concrete community initiative proposals.

### ***Objectives***

The objectives of the course were threefold, each seeking to enhance peaceful relations on a different level:

- Enhanced practical skills: enabling the students to develop a robust skill set in project management, community engagement, conflict resolution, and leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see: [https://www.transcend.org/files/Galtung\\_Book\\_Theories\\_Of\\_Conflict\\_single.pdf](https://www.transcend.org/files/Galtung_Book_Theories_Of_Conflict_single.pdf)



- Increased community impact: supporting students in successfully implementing community-based projects that addressed identified needs and created positive change.
- Stronger university-community partnerships: fostering collaboration between the university and the community, leading to mutually beneficial relationships.

### ***Key Activities - Development of the Students' Community Initiatives***

The participants in the three-day training sessions successfully formed diverse groups to develop community initiative proposals. The process involved:

- **Group formation:** Eight diverse groups were created considering gender and ethnicity.
- **Idea generation:** Each group brainstormed and selected a project to develop.
- **Proposal development:** Participants collaboratively designed detailed project proposals.
- **Feedback and refinement:** The CPCRS provided feedback, and participants iteratively improved their proposals.
- **The CPCRS then selected and supervised the eight projects:** Promoting Social Cohesion Through Reading, Alternatives to Violence Workshop, Ishtar Free Library, Peaceful Living through Pictures, Creating a Video encouraging awareness of bullying and judging others based on their ethnicity and religion, Creating a Video on Social Cohesion, CV Writing for University Students, and Training on Strengthening Social Cohesion.

## **8. Data Collection Methods**

The research was both qualitative and quantitative, employing a mixed-methods approach to gather comprehensive data.

- Observation and field notes: Qualitative observations were conducted throughout the project to document participant interactions, engagement, questions, reflections, and feedback.
- Pre- and post-tests: Quantitative data was collected through the evaluation of pre and post-tests to measure changes in knowledge and skills.
- Interviews, informal conversations, and focus groups: Qualitative data was gathered through interviews, informal conversations, and focus groups during and immediately after project completion to explore participant experiences and perceptions.
- Follow-up questionnaire: To assess the long-term benefits, follow-up questionnaires were emailed to all 40 participants four years after the project was completed. A response rate of 65% (n=26) was achieved. After questionnaire analysis, two focus groups were convened to discuss the findings.
- Combining these methods, through this, the study aimed to provide a rich, multifaceted understanding of the project's outcomes.

All data collection was carried out in Kurdish and the result have been translated here into English.

## **9. Findings**

### ***Pre-training evaluation***

Participant profiles indicated the following:

- Limited prior experience in community initiatives among a significant portion of participants.
- Diverse participation motivations include peacebuilding, social cohesion, and personal development.
- Lack of a clear understanding of the concept of community initiatives.

- Limited knowledge about the stages involved in community initiatives.
- Knowledge gaps in risk assessment tools and the peace tree concept.

### ***Post-Test Training Evaluation***

The post-test evaluation demonstrated a significant increase in participants' knowledge and skills related to community initiatives.

- Enhanced understanding of community initiatives and their purpose.
- Improved ability to design and lead community initiatives.
- Firm grasp of the stages involved in community initiatives.
- Increased knowledge of positions, interests, needs, connectors, and dividers.
- Understanding conflict analysis tools (conflict tree and peace tree) significantly improved.

### ***Indirect impact***

The projects indirectly impacted a broader community beyond the immediate participants.

- Ripple effect among participants' social circles: The knowledge and skills gained by direct participants (students from various colleges and departments) were intended to be shared with their friends and families, thus expanding the project's reach.
- Broader university community impact: Activities like book fairs, seminars, and a free library benefited a larger student population, fostering a sense of community and promoting knowledge sharing. The activities were disseminated through the University of Duhok Web, CPCRS pages, and students' Facebook and other social media pages.
- Institutional reputation enhancement: The university's involvement in social cohesion initiatives, including a collaborative conference, enhanced its reputation as a socially-responsible institution.
- Administrative impact: The project indirectly influenced administrative staff as participants wanted to disseminate information within their departments.

### **Changes in Attitude**

**Overcoming prejudices:** The primary focus of this study was the program's transformative impact on individual attitudes and community dynamics. Participants felt they challenged their preconceived notions about other ethnic and religious groups. The specific change emphasised was a shift from prejudice and speculation to friendship and collaboration between individuals from different religious backgrounds. This change is attributed to direct, personal interaction fostered by the program. One participant mentioned, "I learnt about Christian and Yezidi cultures. It's a very different matter when you see them and spend time together than when you only hear about them. I felt very concerned and suspicious before meeting them face to face". Another expressed, "I never thought that I would have friends from the Yezidi ethnic group – and continue to be friends". Another shared, "My previous thoughts on Muslims changed completely - I was very suspicious and scared of deepening a friendship with a Muslim girl". This demonstrates a significant shift in attitude, moving from suspicion to understanding and respect through direct interaction with individuals from different backgrounds.

**Enhanced self-awareness and awareness of others:** The workshop led participants to know more about their context and be critical of it. One participant said, "we gained valuable insights into societal issues despite being in the city for all my life". Another participant said, "the training used different methodologies of delivering, this made time pass quickly and learning become a fun for example the group's attempt to address bullying through a short film faced unexpected challenges, highlighting the complexity of the issue". Another said, "The program's focus on social issues, such as bullying, this encouraged me and

others to develop a stronger sense of empathy for those who experience discrimination". These statements vividly illustrate the program's transformative impact on participants' attitudes and relationships.

**Cross-cultural learning:** These experiences led to participants forming deep connections with different cultures, fostering friendships and collaborative projects.

**Collaborative and teamwork:** The program's collaborative nature also played a crucial role in fostering these connections. In relation to this, one participant remarked: "The long process that we shared together for planning and implementing initiatives and being together in the training has made us good friends". This shared experience created a strong foundation for mutual trust and support.

Another relevant example was working on a short film with peers from different backgrounds, which required effective communication, compromise, and collaboration, all of which contributed to developing strong interpersonal skills. Another one explained: "I now know a Christian girl, and we work together in research related to Christian genocide in Sumel. It has led me also to know other Christians and Yezidis".

**Expanded network and strengthened relationships:** The workshop proved instrumental in broadening participants' professional network within the university. By fostering connections with key figures such as the Dean and department heads, participants gained valuable insights and opportunities for collaboration. Moreover, the training was pivotal in strengthening relationships between students and university staff. This enhanced sense of community and shared purpose will likely facilitate future collaborations and initiatives, enriching the overall academic environment. Moreover, building on these initial connections, participants developed strong bonds. One shared, "We have had some good moments together and we're still in good contact with one another".

**Strengthened sense of community:** The program fostered a strong community among participants, allowing for in-depth discussions and supporting collaborative projects. One participant said, "We have become very close friends, we became aware that we have a lot of things common I mean more connectors, shared interest than dividers". Furthermore, the impact of the program extended beyond individual relationships. "I have changed my family thoughts on the other groups living in Kurdistan," one participant stated. Another shared, "I have attended the wedding of a Yezidi friend, this is the first time that I and my whole family has done this". These statements highlight the ripple effect of the program, influencing not only participants but also their families and social circles.

**Personal development:** Overcoming challenges encountered during the training project, such as the unexpected findings about discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes, can cultivate resilience and a growth mindset. One participant said, "the workshop helped me overcome my fear of public speaking. I now feel more confident in expressing my opinions and ideas in group settings". One participant experienced a transformation from being a participant to a workshop facilitator and later conducted an Alternatives to Violence workshop with another colleague.

### **Improvements in Skills and Knowledge**

**Personal professional development:** The workshop equipped participants with practical personal and professional growth tools. "I am using the 'conflict mapping' (that we learnt in the workshop) on the diplomacy simulation... Also, I am using 'the force field analysis' a lot in relation to getting knowledge," they explained. This highlights the workshop's effectiveness in transferring applicable skills.

**Developed leadership skills:** One participant appreciated their first time as a group leader: "The workshop provided opportunities to take on leadership roles, which helped me develop my decision-making and problem-solving abilities, for example we had to choose one proposal of initiatives from a lot". Another

said, "I gained confidence in my ability to motivate and inspire others, and I'm now more comfortable taking initiative".

**Improved critical thinking and problem-solving abilities:** One participant said, "In groups, in homework, in reflection time, sometimes we had complex issues. The workshop challenged me to think critically about complex issues and develop creative solutions". Another said, "I learned how to analyse problems from multiple perspectives and identify effective strategies to address them".

**Time management and organisational skills:** One participant said, "The workshop helped me improve my time-management skills and ability to prioritize tasks. We had to choose one out of many sometimes, and it was necessary to make a clear decision in time". One wrote, "I became more organised and learnt how to work on several projects at the same time".

They were constantly required to employ critical thinking and problem-solving skills when having to address, speak on, or discuss community issues, as well as adverse results in their data regarding bullying; a quality that is very important when working toward conflict resolution.

## **Improvements in Behaviour and Actions**

**More awareness of social dynamics and increased empathy:** Being around diverse groups of people can highlight who you are and your biases. Interaction with friends and community of different religions supported participants' newfound belief or mindset. As a female participant said: "The workshop made me much more aware of how people outside my circle live and experience life. I have learned to be more compassionate and nonjudgmental about different viewpoints". Another said, "It made me more tolerant and respectful of different cultures and faiths".

**Using what they learned:** Participants felt empowered and wanted to share their new skills right away. "I even made friends from different religion (I did not have any such friend before participating)", one noted. This is a concrete change in behaviour that can help foster interfaith and intercommunal connections.

**Becoming agents of change:** The program prepared participants to enable positive change. One said: "It has made us collaborate and support each other in the university as well". It also shows the program's success in nurturing a new cadre of confident leaders willing to tackle community-building issues diligently.

**Participants' testimonials and social media:** The high level of excitement reflected in participants' feedback and their willingness to share their experiences on social media provides is a powerful testament to the program's impact.

**Increasing visibility:** Participant positive testimonials on social media, increase the reach and visibility of the program to potential future participants.

**Marketing the program:** Honest testimonials from participants can create trust and credibility for the program, reassuring possible funders and encouraging others to participate.

**Grassroots inspiration:** Sharing success stories can lead others to overcome challenges to similar achievements.

## **10. Long term impact**

The response (65%) to the questionnaire shared four years after project completion demonstrated the highly positive and lasting impact on participants. Overwhelmingly, they reported that the knowledge

and skills acquired during the project remained relevant (80.8%) and applied in both personal and professional spheres (69.2%). More than 90% agreed or agreed that the project contributed to their personal growth, career advancement, and job satisfaction. All participants rated the project's overall impact on their professional development as "very significant" and would recommend similar initiatives to others.

### **Applicable Knowledge**

Participants emphasised a marked increase in their theoretical and applicable knowledge, with many noting a deeper understanding of conflict-resolution techniques, mediation processes and the complexities of conflict. One participant stated, "I gained deeper knowledge of conflict resolution techniques and mediation processes". Another shared, "The project opened my eyes to the complexities of conflict and the importance of understanding different perspectives".

Regarding knowledge retention, 96% of participants could recall at least three theories learned during the project, including active listening, the third side, mediation, recognising gender disparities, and leadership.

### **Attitudes and Behavioural Changes**

Participants reported the project had a huge impact on how they viewed conflict and peacebuilding. More than 87% agreed with this, or said that it changed their perspective on them. In addition, 61% recorded massively changed attitudes and behaviours towards people from other ethnic or cultural groups, with a further 38% suggesting some change.

Transformations shared by participants were life-changing and powerful! One told the researcher they were committed to getting rid of stereotypes: "Before the project, I had some stereotypes about Yazidi religion. But once I started working with them closely, boy was I wrong. I have a far deeper appreciation for their culture and traditions". Others reported changes in their general perspective on conflict: "For sure, the project completely shifted my view on conflict. I thought of it in terms of destruction, but now I see it as an opportunity to transform — or be transformed".

Most participants developed a greater sense of the importance of dialogue, understanding, and the complexities of peacebuilding. One reflected: "I learnt more about how dialogue and understanding the perspectives of both parties are crucial in solving conflicts. I also believe now that peaceful solutions are always available". And another stated, "I once thought peacebuilding was simple – the project opened my eyes to its nuances and highlighted the need to tackle root causes".

There was also sense of belonging and inclusion. In overcoming isolation and creating connections across a diverse clientele. Another said, "I used to think I was the only one who felt unexplained alienation from people of the majority community. Here, I got to forge connections and network with people who come from a myriad of backgrounds. Now am feeling a bit normal and not alone".

Aside from these shifts, participants reported greater self-confidence, empathy, and tolerance. Most of them valued the emphasis on communication in the project and the exposure to different perspectives they had gained. One participant said: "The workshop was helpful for me as I feared to speak in public. I am now more confident to speak up, share my opinions and ideas in a group". One wrote, "Going to the workshop really gave me insight into what its like for people with other backgrounds. I have developed empathy and understanding of different viewpoints".

Meanwhile, some participants found that the project confirmed existing positive beliefs or assumptions rather than challenging negative ones. As one participant explained, "Before the project I was already more invested in peacebuilding issues. The project confirmed what I believed, not changed it".

Some wanted to engage more deeply with targeted communities or faiths, but at personal remove. As one wrote, "I like mixing with other faiths but otherwise keep to my own".

These responses reflect the complex nature of attitude and behavioural change, demonstrating that individual differences should be considered when assessing the influence of such initiatives.

### Skills Development

The training improved the participants' skills greatly, as many reported learning skills in conflict resolution, mediation, active listening and critical thinking and leadership. Notably, all participants indicated that they used these skills in their everyday lives.

The project also helped shape the professional trajectories of participants. Every respondent reported that the project had an impact on their professional objectives. Some noted that this module had sparked an interest in peacebuilding as a career and people referred to skills gained as being competitive job-market advantages. One explained, "Definitely the project inspired me to consider peacebuilding as a career course. This has been a door opener for me in the field of peacebuilding" Another said: "The skills have made me a better contender for jobs".

Six participants also continued their education to solidify their knowledge and skills, with some earning Masters in conflict resolution or peacebuilding diplomas. Moreover, the project enhanced personal growth and professional development, as participants improved their communication and interpersonal skills, as well as group facilitation and consensus building.

Regarding contexts in which participants had successfully applied the skills learned, their responses made clear that implementation occurred across a variety of venues. One participant said: "Of course, I have – applied active listening to mediate a conflict between neighbours in my community. This really helped us on common ground and making sure that we were both ok with what we had done". Another said: "Through the project, I learned about building trust, and that skill has been instrumental for me as a leader in the community. Example: I have done a good job of bringing different groups together to target common problems".

Most participants had positive experiences, but a few stated that applying their skills was difficult in the field because of complicated community dynamics or insufficient opportunities. Nevertheless, the importance of these skills for managing conflicts among all types of relationships and how they also informed their approach to problem-solving was highlighted by one participant.

It also acted as a springboard for leadership development and critical thinking capabilities. Participants felt more confident and capable of making decisions and problem-solving. In addition, the project engendered a sense of purpose and social responsibility, which kept participants motivated to pursue local issues as they could see how addressing community needs could lead to positive change. One noted: "Participating in a project to solve a social problem can lead to purpose and drive to contribute constructively".

The project equipped many participants with useful skills however some faced difficulties relating them to a career opportunity. One participant commented, "The project was a great experience but has not yet moved me up the career ladder. But I think, in the long term, those skills were necessary to acquire". Some found that, while the project was still a great opportunity and expanded their career options, it did not exactly fit with their existing roles.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of participants found ways to transfer their newfound skills into real life. Respondents showed improved conflict mediation skills, closer community relations, and more empathy and understanding to address disagreements. One participant remarked, "I applied the

conflict resolution strategies that I learnt for a dispute between neighbours. This was hard but the tools I used helped us meet in the middle".

However, a minority of participants found challenges in being able to apply these consistently. Access limitations, intricate community dynamics, and salient power disparities inhibited their success. One participant said, "I get that the skills learned are important and needed but beyond that I have not been implementing them much in my everyday situations. They're really awesome and I hope to get them in play more often". Another spoke about difficulties in implementing strategies in communities where there was significant resistance to such projects.

These findings highlight the need to consider the broader context within which participants work and appreciate that application of skills likely differs, depending on individual circumstances and realities in different communities.

## **Personal Growth and Impact**

Respondents felt the initiative related to them personally and a big part of their development. Most cited getting out of their comfort zones, combating prejudice, and developing compassion and open-mindedness. As one stated, "Definitely, the project forced me out of my comfort zone and challenged the biases I held". Another explained: "I have learned to be more considerate/open-minded". Some spoke about newfound self-confidence, better communication skills, and stronger relationships.

Although the project seemed to have a strong effect on personal development of most participants, several found the effect more indirect. As one said: "It's difficult to measure, but I think I have developed as a person during this experience. I discovered so much more about myself and my role in the world". Others claimed greater consciousness of social inequities and a stronger desire to get involved in community activism.

The project's ripple effects extended beyond individual participants, with many sharing success stories of friends who pursued further opportunities in the field. For instance, one stated, "I heard of another participant who started working with an NGO after the project". Some mentioned friends working as co-trainers or data collectors for different organisations.

Participants overwhelmingly indicated that they would recommend a similar project to others. They described how the experience transformed their lives, providing them with new skills and knowledge, and a clearer sense of purpose. One said, "I would definitely suggest this kind of project to anyone interested in helping. It has been a transformational experience that brought me great skills and insights".

## **Relationship Building**

Participants felt they bonded during the project, and 100% reported that they made close friends during the programme and had remained in contact with at least one other participant. In addition, 88% had been in touch with several other participants and 56% had worked on further peacebuilding projects.

Participants consistently identified relationship building as a benefit of the project. One reflected, "What I enjoyed the most about the project was being able to build skills in my first-hand experience of peacebuilding. It has equipped me with the skills to contribute to my society by learning new things about conflict resolution, mediation and dialogue". Another highlighted that they valued learning "how to build trust and relations with people from different culture backgrounds".

Through the experiences, many participants explained they were able to develop deeper connections and lasting friendships. One said: "Yes, I made some very close friends with the other

participants. We shared a lot, and it bonded us tightly together". Another wrote, "I was exposed to diversity. We kept in touch and cheer each other on with our work over the years".

The most participants described positive effects regarding development and maintenance of relationships but some met challenges in maintaining relationships over time. Having to contend with work schedules, geographical distance and differing priorities, made this very challenging. As one expressed, "Unfortunately, I have lost touch with most other participants. I took off, things got busy and we drifted apart".

By focusing on building relationships, however, this project was able to deliver great personal and professional benefits. The relationships built through this program helped to create a network of support and encouraged further joint work in peacebuilding.

## **Collaboration and Networking**

Different levels of collaboration among participants followed in peacebuilding initiatives inspired by this project. Some worked successfully on grassroots projects such as hosting workshops and implementing peacebuilding programs. For example, one participant stated: "Yes, I have been working together with other project participants at a community-based peacebuilding initiative. We've organised workshops and conflict resolution youth training in Sumel".

However, others needed support in initiating or sustaining collaborations. Some participants needed more opportunities to engage in further peacebuilding projects, while others struggled to find like-minded individuals or organisations. One respondent said: "I attempted to arrange a few collaborations, however it was hard to locate individuals and organisations with similar ideas".

Networking and maintaining relationships as a way to keep peacebuilding knowledge and skills alive was acknowledged by many. However, some participants needed help in initiating or sustaining collaborations. Some needed more opportunities to engage in further peacebuilding projects, while others struggled to find like-minded individuals or organisations. They noted the importance of hearing from other members of their projects about experiences, challenges and success stories. As one said, "Being in contact with other participants is essential. We share experiences, challenges, and successes that keep me updated on current ways of peacebuilding". Although the majority of respondents appreciated the opportunity for networking, a minority noted that true collaboration opportunities within the network were sparse. Overall, however, sentiment was positive, with participants pointing to the skills and knowledge gained, the networks developed and contribution to community, as well as personal growth opportunities.

The results of the project as a whole were good, but it would be naive to think that all participants underwent such huge transformation. While 65% responded to the questionnaire, this meant that 35% did not. Moreover, some reported that although they found the project informative, it did little for their position. "I think it was informative and useful, but not particularly transformative in how I see conflict", said one participant. "I still think that in certain situations, violence is justified". Others described the project as "[c]reating uncomfortable questions without having to create specific answers".

The greatest percentage of participants recommended similar projects to others, highlighting the transformative power of such experiences. Most were clear that adequate support and resources need to be available for projects to be successful.

## **11. Conclusion**

The findings reveal the substantial impact of university-based peacebuilding programs in fostering positive behavioural change among participants in Iraqi Kurdistan. The results highlight what the CPCRS



program was able to achieve in terms of knowledge, attitudes, skills and personal development as well as broader implications for participants' approach to their work and community overall.

### **Overview of Participants' Initial Abilities**

- Limited conflict-resolution training: Most participants had limited experience in conflict resolution training, thus there is a strong demand for such programs.
- Misperceptions of conflict: Most participants had negative conceptions about conflict — associating it primarily with violence.
- Fundamentals of peace and communication: Participants had only shallow knowledge of fundamental principles of peacebuilding.
- Uncertain intergroup relations: Participants reported low comfort levels interacting with those from different backgrounds.
- Acknowledging the challenges of social cohesion: Participants identified threats to social cohesion in their community.

Diverse motivations: Participants were motivated by multiple factors to engage, such as personal development, community engagement and peacebuilding goals.

### **Overview of the Conflict Resolution Training**

- Positive evaluation of training: Participants reported high satisfaction regarding content, delivery and trainers.
- Knowledge gain: There was significant improvement in participants' knowledge regarding conflict, peace, gender, social cohesion and communication.
- What they learnt: participants said they gained skills in conflict resolution, communication, teamwork, dealing with personalities, self-expression and gender skills.
- Positive intergroup relations: Participants reported high comfort interacting with those from different backgrounds.
- High satisfaction amongst participants: In general, the training was viewed as a success by the participants who reported that they would be very likely to recommend it.

It also highlighted how the project built relationships and provided a basis for future peacebuilding. In particular, the enhanced sense of community and shared purpose among students and staff will lead to future collaborations and initiatives, enriching the academic environment. But the study also reveals that maintaining these gains over time is a significant challenge.

One of the most important lessons learned from this research is that truly effective peacebuilding must be locally-owned: while broadly supported externally, a peacebuilding process which does not have local capacity and local commitment will only work in the short-term. While the short-term impact of the program on difficult issues—like building ties between diverse groups—was evident, maintaining these gains over the long-term was more difficult than expected, underscoring the value of ongoing support and flexible approaches. To ensure peacebuilding programmes have a prolonged effect, long-term investment in capacity, mentorship, and networking is crucial. These findings reinforce Lederach's (1997) arguments about the need to develop peace infrastructures from below.

More research is needed to understand how peacebuilding programs can remain sustained over time and what innovative methods might be used to better manage the complexities of sustaining their momentum and impact. Although the size and content of the response to the questionnaire demonstrated that the students remained enthusiastic four years later, the issues they encountered in putting their knowledge into practice indicate the need for further support.

Finally, this study highlights the need for evidence-based approaches to peacebuilding. This was a case study in Kurdistan, but it has valuable information for other countries which are struggling due to conflict. Systematic evaluation of such programs can inform policymakers, practitioners and future researchers about what works in practice, and what does not. Thus, they will all be better able to work together for communities affected by conflict.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations aim to enable policymakers and stakeholders to foster an inclusive education system that could contribute to a more peaceful and equitable society in Iraqi Kurdistan:

### *For academic policymakers*

- Allocating sufficient resources for peacebuilding initiatives inside campuses, including training programs, research, and infrastructure. In particular, community-based projects to promote understanding between individuals and groups of different faiths.
- Strengthening the capacity of volunteers through targeted training programs would enhance the impact of volunteerism in universities. The Computer Centre should play a pivotal role in organizing and implementing these training initiatives.
- Equipping universities with necessary tools, offering specific training programs for volunteers will increase the effectiveness. For example, computer centres are essential to coordinating and maintaining the different training activities.
- Supporting research initiatives that assess the impact of peace programs such as those implemented by the Centre for Peace, Conflict, and Reconciliation Studies (CPCRS). Such research would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of peace programs, as well as enlightening future interventions.
- Incorporating peacebuilding psychographies in curricula for other subjects: Peacebuilding capacities – such as negotiation, listening skills, mediation – are useful to students in many disciplines and a variety of jobs. Applied courses could be elective and available to all human science faculties.
- Promoting interdisciplinary collaboration: cross-college notifications would help departments work together around peacebuilding.
- Developing an online platform for long-term networked support and resources after course completion would maximise gains to the wider community.

### *For corporate bodies*

- Corporate training: Provide continuous training with practical skills in conflict resolution, mediation, negotiation and dialogue for corporate employees.

Engage with the community: carry out community engagement initiatives to facilitate experience-based learning in peacebuilding.

### *For NGOs and CSOs*

- Community-based initiatives: Mobilize university students to work on community-driven initiatives in conflict-resolution and peacebuilding.
- Religious tolerance / interfaith dialogue: Use community-based initiatives to promote a sense of understanding between individuals and groups of different faiths.
- Women's participation: Building women's peacebuilding capacities also helps the community at many levels.
- Networking and collaboration: key activities would include setting up multiple partnerships among NGOs and government agencies to create a pool of resources and support work on the ground. Also,

enabling sharing among like-minded NGOs for information-sharing, fund mobilization efforts, knowledge-building, and networking with corporate bodies.

- Advocacy and lobbying for peacebuilding capacities at university policy level could encourage constructive change.

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