

Experiential Peacebuilding, Youth Leadership, and Democratic Governance Training

Iraq – Summer 2010

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OVERVIEW

This reflection paper draws on my experience as the 2010 Iraqi Youth Summer Leadership Program Director, based in Kirkuk, Erbil and Rawandouz in Northern Iraq for an NGO called ACDI/VOCA funded by USAID. I believe that my experiences during those 75 days, working with a diverse group of facilitators, translators, staff and youth participants, provide me with a unique window to contribute to this topic focused on community healing and engagement in times of disaster.

Specifically, I will focus on two questions:

1. How can individuals and communities sustain a vision of and practice of peace and resilience in the midst of crisis and disaster?
2. How are communities finding new forms of expression? And how is that reducing the space between the communities and the government.

GOAL

The 2010 Iraqi Youth Leadership and Local Governance Summer Camp endeavored to create a space to practice cross group teamwork and collaborative problem solving, to share and appreciate the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of their peers, to understand what it means to be an active and engaged citizen in a new democracy, and to envision a shared future where they could become leaders for positive peaceful change in their communities.

WHO

Participants - Week 1: 27 Iraqi men and women train as experiential peacebuilding facilitators, Week 2: 150 young Iraqi men. Week 3: 100 young Iraqi women. 16-25 years old, from Salah Ad Din, Ninawa, Kirkuk and Diyala provinces – from ethnic backgrounds that included Turkmen, Kurds, and both Sunni and Shia Arabs as well as religious diversity including Christians, Muslims and Secular youth. These young people were chosen by their communities to participate in the program. For many campers this camp was the first opportunity to live and work with other Iraqi youth from a different province, different ethnic group or religious group.

Facilitators - were trained and assigned to artificial provinces A,B,C,D and E. Each facilitator group mirrored the artificial province composition. They were comprised of men and women, Arabic and Kurdish speakers, of various religious backgrounds, from a geographic dispersion from their real provinces, and varied across the age spectrum. The diversity of the gathering was a key strength and point of uniqueness.

WHAT

Through experiential learning activities this diverse group of youth learned about Iraqi local government structures and electioneering procedures, how to participate in local community development and mobilize their peers to action around issues of importance to them. They learned what it means to be an active and engaged citizen in a democracy, and how they could participate more effectively in their community.

The experiential peacebuilding activities are designed as a progression, which builds the skills of communication and teamwork, and hones the nuances based on the knowledge developed during each prior activity. The facilitated debrief of each activity elicits the learning moments as the campers analyze what made them successful or why they struggled. This is now shared information, about a shared

experience that they went through together as a group, and upon which they can now draw to be more successful in their future challenges as a group, further cementing those interpersonal bonds.

The learning objectives of the camp focused on building leadership skills as well as effective communication and cross-group collaboration skills and enhancing the confidence levels of all campers in order for them to be able to address shared problems or challenges in their home communities. The camp curriculum focused on developing these skills while teaching about the new democratic structure in Iraq, and how to function effectively within that system as an engaged citizen. It focused on elections and voting procedures, parliamentary procedure and how to write resolutions, as well as public speaking skills and campaigning and coalition building.

HOW

Each of the “artificial provinces” A,B,C,D and E included campers from each actual geographic province (Salah Ad Din, Ninawa, Kirkuk and Diyala) and from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, and with an age range from 15-25 years old. The first day the campers described “their artificial province,” giving it strengths and weaknesses and creating province posters depicting some of these strengths. Some even gave a name to their province, like “Province of Hope” or “Province of Economic Prosperity.” After initial icebreaker activities campers began to create new, shared, temporary identities for their “artificial province” A,B,C,D or E; and began to root for and support “their” province—which was in fact comprised of representatives from all four real provinces with the diversity noted above. The campers worked together in these artificial provinces to discuss and resolve issues of leadership and practice democratic processes that need to be promoted in their communities, they elected provincial representatives, and then a governor for their province. They also organized a camp wide campaign to try and elect their provincial governor as the camp governor. The artificial provinces are critical towards creating a new “temporary identity” that allows the campers the opportunity to break down stereotypes and develop teamwork across groups and divisions that previously had little or no interaction with each other. The significance of this moment, when they started becoming a part of a new group, and no longer primarily identifying themselves simply by their ethnic group or actual geographic province, was profound indeed. The Facilitators also role modeled how to effectively come together as a diverse group, and were effective in communicating the ideas of forming new friendships and working together with new friends. During the final evening dancing event, there was an appreciation of cultural heritage and nuances through the playing of different ethnic songs so different groups could dance according to their customs and different ethnic groups could mix and dance to each other's music.

Elections: The election activities were spread out over 3 days. The campers had a chart of positions one would find at the Qada, Nahiya and Provincial levels

1. Provincial Council Chair
2. Director General for Agriculture
3. Director General for Education
4. Director General for Health
5. Province Governor.

Each province (A,B,C,D and E) nominated provincial representatives, and then a province governor, held campaigns and elections for each position, and then they supported their province governor as he/she ran for Camp Governor. For each of the 3 election cycles candidates practiced lobbying, creating coalitions and banners, presenting speeches and registering and casting their ballots. They watched as the ballots were publicly counted, learned the importance of the privacy of their vote, and a winner was announced, and an acceptance speech was given on the final day in Arabic, Kurdish and Turkman, quite inspiring.

The Representatives from the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT's) and from USAID Erbil attended and witnessed the Final Day Election Process for the Camp Governor – from voter registration, to campaign speeches and slogans, to actual vote casting and public counting of the ballots, and the announcement of the winner and her acceptance speech. They were asked to serve as independent international election monitors, and took their responsibility seriously.

Sports activities were woven into the curriculum using a local gymnasium for basketball (Girls) and the local 6v6 football pitch (Boys). Volleyball nets were also used outside the office villa on the flat grass. The

teams were comprised of youth from their artificial provinces, meaning that there were Arabs, Kurds and Turks playing together, communicating and practicing teamwork in an arena they were all familiar. The competition with other teams bred collaboration within the teams, meaning the artificial provinces grew more tightly knit together. This was also an excellent ice breaker between the facilitators and staff, and the campers – as the 6th team entered in all the tournaments was comprised of facilitators and staff members. Being on the field competing and having fun together, as well as demonstrating sportsmanship, allowed participants from all groups, campers, facilitators and staff to appreciate the power of sport to bridge divides.

Field Day Competitions were organized in the form of tug-o-war, relay races, three-legged races, sack races, egg balancing and a water balloon toss. These new games to campers enabled teams from the 5 artificial provinces to compete for medals and to learn how to work physically as well as mentally together. Celebrating success, and cheering up each other after losses, is such an important part of these events. The emotional intelligence to recognize how someone else is feeling when winning or losing and recognizing that as a human being that you have experienced that same emotion at some point, serves as a powerful empathic tool to more easily relate to each other across perceived divisions, and helps to quickly develop bonds that have depth to them.

The Arts and Culture committee provided an opportunity for campers with special talents to showcase them, and to receive training and feedback from Facilitators who had expertise in these areas. Campers practiced photography, calligraphy, and pencil artwork; along with singing, dance and poetry. The best examples were exhibited during the cultural exhibition at the Final Awards Ceremony. The songs, dances and poetry readings brought real energy and focus to the beginning of the Final Awards Ceremony, helping to create the special atmosphere of Iraqi cultural sharing and cultural pride, along with the display and recognition of special talents. One of the Facilitators wrote a camp anthem for the camp, which was sung at the boy's camp and a song of love and hope that, was sung at the Girls' Camp. These songs especially brought out pride and unity.

Field Trips:

Both the Boys and the Girls' Camp had the opportunity to celebrate their hard work during the first 3 days of the camp with an afternoon visit to Bekhal Falls and a chance to decompress and have a few hours of fun wading in the cool water under the hot sun, climbing on the rocks in different parts of the waterfall, and taking many photographs with their new found friends and facilitators. In this safe space the youth bought ice creams and super soaker water toys and memorabilia. Laughter and ear to ear smiles were the order of the day. Our group was easily identified in this public space by our white T-shirts with the YSC Logo on the front, and generated interest from tourists who were visiting the Falls from around Iraq. The youth became Ambassadors for our program explaining why they were there and what they were learning as members of the YSC Camp. At this point the artificial provinces have had a chance to form, and friendships had been built, and the T-shirts served as a visual reminder of the unity and equality of all the campers, regardless of artificial province (or ethnic group). The campers wore the T-shirts with pride, for what it stands for, and what they are a part of.

At the Boys' Camp one morning was spent on a challenging hike through a local sandstone canyon. 75 of the boys chose to participate, and 10 of the facilitators, came along to help supervise, and enjoy the time in nature. With the help of local guides from the Mayors security team we wound our way along a narrow path on a steep hillside along the side of a canyon with a flowing river at the bottom. We passed traditional shepherd summer camps, 2 springs bubbling out of the side of the canyon, and observed numerous local plants, nuts, berries, and medicinal herbs. The terrain was challenging and youth often had to help each other up and down difficult scrambling sections on the trail. This reinforced the notion of caring for others around you, and helping make sure that everyone can achieve the goal and reach the end of the hike. Another positive aspect of the hike was the natural small group conversations that are stimulated by hiking along a single track path. Youth got to discuss their first few days, share their surprises and what they learned about being an active and engaged citizen in a new democracy. There was a mix between time for individual reflection and time for group processing and sharing.

To provide a **LINK** to the 2009 Camp, and a role model and inspiration to the youth at the 2010 Camp, the elected Camp Governors were invited back to attend and participate in the Girls and Boys' Camp

respectively. They floated around between artificial provinces, sharing what they learned, providing pointers and feedback to current campers, and participating in activities when appropriate. They also delivered inspirational speeches on what they did after being elected Governor last year to participants just before voting for 2010 Governor.

Celebrating Success Together: the camp culminated in an energy-filled, action-packed cultural presentation and awards ceremony, where they each received a certificate highlighting their successful participation in the camp; and they recognized their facilitators and camp officials with loud ovations and applause. The night was filled with a celebration banquet and the sharing and teaching of their traditional dances outside under the stars to a local DJ.

SO NOW WHAT?

The two Director Generals and Directors from the Ministry of Youth and Sports who attended and observed, asked for a separate meeting with the CDD and ACDD to discuss potential joint collaboration with the Ministry on expanding and sustaining Youth Parliament activities and promoting summer camps on democracy as a potential program activity between ACDIVOCA and the Ministry of Youth and Sports through the youth centers.

During a meeting with the USAID PRT Representatives, the Director Generals and the Directors of the Ministry of Youth and Sports highlighted that they would like to replicate similar programs in each of their provinces, as well as have ACDI/VOCA hold a specific leadership and democratic governance training using the camp program for the members of the Iraqi National Youth Parliament from northern Iraq. They also wanted to have further collaboration such that ACDI/VOCA could help train not only these youth parliamentarians but also a core group of youth as facilitators in the northern provinces who could then act as Facilitators for similar programs which the Ministry of Youth and Sports, (and, once funding is secured,) could hold at district youth forums (centers).

The DG from Salahaddin noted that they had two open seats for the Iraqi National Youth Parliament, and he would extend invitations to the girls who were from Salahaddin that participated well in the Camp Governor election process – as he felt the leadership roles they achieved at the camp would serve them well and they would have good experience to become members of the Youth Parliament. They subsequently asked the 2010 Governor of the Youth Summer Camp who was from Tikrit to become a member of the Salahaddin Youth Parliament.

CONCLUSION

How can individuals and communities sustain a vision of and practice of peace and resilience in the midst of crisis and disaster?

1. Practical, action-based, Youth focused programs
2. Experiential Peacebuilding - Learn it by Doing it
3. Amplify the impact – develop leaders for positive peaceful change in their home communities
4. Intricate understanding of the infrastructure of the system of governance.

How are communities finding new forms of expression?

1. Understanding what it means to be an active and engaged citizen in a new democracy
2. Developing their own voice and their own message utilizing limit-less creativity in forms of expression...speeches, art work, slogans, banners, calligraphy, song, dance, sport,
3. Communities FIND these new forms of expression through experience, through trial and error, through “monkey see, monkey do”, through testing the limits of what their security environment will hold.

And how is that reducing the space between the communities and the government?

The more people who know about the new system, how it is structured, how it works, who is responsible for what; then the better chance that system has to actually work as intended. For that elected official to actually represent the voice of the people. For that community member to know they can show up at the Local Government Council and make a public statement for or against a proposal that is under consideration. The more

people who understand how it works and what their role is, restores a greater trust in the system, reducing the space between the communities and the government.

Returning Home Skit: The purpose of this final experiential learning activity is to review what they have learned during the week, and to begin thinking about returning home as leaders for positive change in their communities. In order to be successful leaders they will have to be good communicators – to many different people. This skit is an opportunity to practice those conversations. With the facilitators acting as A. parents; B. friends; and C. a difficult member of the community; they ask questions of the campers who want to participate in the skit. After a camper has completed the skit, the Facilitators debrief with all the campers: What did he/she say that was effective? What would you have said differently? How can you be a leader for change in your community? with your family? with your friends? with the whole community? In this way participants begin thinking about how they can effectively convey to members of their home communities, who did not get to share their week of cross group experiences with a diverse group of youth from the 4 different provinces, what they learned and how they were impacted by it.

As they piled onto the buses the next morning, I spoke to each bus before they left – challenging each of the young people to expand the impact of the camp, and bring the lessons they learned home to their families, friends and communities. “Can you do this?” I asked, “YES!” they responded loudly in unison. The future of Iraq will soon be in their hands.