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Partners in Research:
Participatory Research Training Pilot with Young People in Mosul, Iraq

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This Research Fieldwork Note provides a summary of a pilot program undertaken by UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project in concert with its partners: Bridge (Iraqi NGO and consultancy), UNICEF's country office in Iraq, War Child UK, IOM's country office in Iraq, 100cameras, and Progress in Peace in Mosul, Iraq in June 2023. The pilot involved providing research skills training to conflict-affected youth in Mosul. The goal of the pilot was to ensure that young people help inform action research about them (which will in turn inform policies and programing aimed at them) and help participants acquire skills that can be used to advance a range of educational or professional pursuits.

Background

By the time the war with ISIL ended in December 2017, there were some 5 million Iraqis displaced within the country. To date, most internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned, but for many, this was not an easy homecoming. While all IDPs face challenges coming home, one group that has faced specific challenges due to the way they are identified by their communities are those families who are perceived to be affiliated with ISIL, often due to the behaviour or affiliation of a family member. In addition, there are tens of thousands of Iraqi children – most of whom are languishing in camps in Northeast Syria, or for older boys, detention there – who are also trying to return home. They face many of the same, as well as some unique, challenges to coming back to their communities and restarting their lives after conflict.

There is currently significant programmatic and research attention on the return and reintegration of Iraqi IDPs moving back to their communities, particularly children. Yet, existing efforts to assess and respond to youth reintegration challenges across contexts are more aspirational than reality. When such efforts do exist, engagement can be tokenistic,[3] largely extractive and indirect, with young people's experiences and needs interpreted by adult researchers and practitioners.

There is a pressing need to shift the paradigm of how the international community supports conflict-affected young people with action research about them. In light of this need, UNIDIR, alongside UNICEF, War Child UK, Bridge, 100cameras, IOM, and Progress in Peace launched an initiative to amplify the voices of returning youth in Iraq. The initiative sought to co-generate action research to inform programmatic interventions meant to address the unique reintegration needs and aspirations of returning Iraqi youth. This is a small step in moving from treating young people as passive beneficiaries to partnering with them to build peace.

The Pilot Intervention Study

The pilot described herein builds on MEAC's research in Iraq since late 2021, and its efforts to advance participatory research methodologies with young people more broadly since 2019. The experiences of conflicted affected children and youth captured in MEAC studies like

[3] Roger A. Hart, "Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship," *Innocenti Essays*, No. 4., UNICEF.

Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Children from Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation: Experiences from Iraq and Al Hol informed the participatory research outlined in this and the accompanying report. The participatory research piloted in Iraq in 2023 by this consortium included two innovative interventions that engaged conflict-affected Iraqi young people as partners in action research to inform MEAC's study in Iraq. The first intervention was a qualitative training programme for youth researchers held in Mosul, which sought to prepare young people to co-facilitate focus groups with their peers. If ethical and security conditions were met, the culmination of this training was to be youth-driven and co-facilitated focus groups with young people to gather nuanced insights into the challenges faced by returning Iraqi youth and what they identify as sources of resilience that sustain them in the face of adversity.

Several of the research themes designed to be explored in these focus groups with young returnees were also the subject of the second pilot intervention - a participatory photography intervention by 100cameras in Mosul. This transformative program equipped youth with photography skills, enabling them to process their experiences and share their stories through images. The culmination of the photography intervention was a series of photo walks to respond to corresponding research theme prompts, which were intended to produce visual representations of the experiences, emotions, and aspirations of youth participants. A separate report details the implementation of this photography intervention in Mosul, discusses lessons learned, and provides recommendations for implementing similar interventions in other contexts.

Ultimately, the objectives of these two intertwined pilot interventions were to:

- Ensure MEAC's research and the policy research outputs it produces for UN partners reflect and amplify the perspectives of young, conflict-affected people in Iraq.

- Use different methodologies to explore the return and reintegration progress of Iraqi families with perceived ISIL affiliation to add different dimensions to and thus enhanced the resulting evidence base.

- Enhance the skills and networks of participating young people to benefit them, as well as their families and communities.

- Showcase to the international community the value and accessibility of, as well as challenges associated with, participatory research with young conflict-affected people in Iraq and beyond, and identify lessons learned that could assist other policymakers and practitioners who seek to integrate it into their work.

Design and Implementation

The following organizations involved in participatory research and youth research training programs in Iraq were brought together to form a technical steering group to design these two participatory components and ensure they "speak" to each other and the larger research agenda.

- **UNICEF Iraq** – Donor partner on the MEAC project in Iraq. UN-lead on child reintegration, history supporting artistic interventions to capture children's perspectives and with participatory methods.

- **War Child UK** – runs the youth-led advocacy programme VoiceMore in Iraq and several other countries, which has produced and piloted a related research training module for youth advocates.

- **Bridge** (Iraqi NGO and consultancy) – leads a Century Foundation-supported initiative to train and promote the work of Iraqi youth as policy researchers.

- **IOM Iraq** – key MEAC donor partner on the Iraq case study and supporting the returns and reintegration of Iraqi families from Northeast Syria.

Pilot Research Training Overview

Photo 1: Facilitator photograph of girls attending the course in Mosul, 2023.

The pilot research training programme was piloted in Mosul, Iraq from 10-13 June 2023. Mosul was selected as the location for the pilot because it had a large returnee population and had several existing UN agency programs which this pilot is designed to complement and inform. Access and permissions to conduct the training in Mosul were secured at various levels. Participants were selected from a group of beneficiaries that UNICEF was already supporting through its local implementing partner in Mosul.

The pilot curriculum was designed for a small mixed group of 15-17-year-old Iraqis who had been perceived as ISIL affiliated and/or had returned from Northeast Syria. The recruitment criteria were that they would be able to read and write in Arabic and were expected to have had

some schooling[4] and be able to grasp basic research concepts. The expectation was that referred participants would be willing to participate together in group exercises and engage in focus group discussions on an array of issues, and possibly even some on conflict-related topics (if doing so was deemed safe and participants were willing).

The plan was for referred participants to meet as many criteria as possible, have a clear idea of and assent to the program they would be participating in, and that their parents would formally consent to their involvement. The consent protocol included parents signing consent forms for each child, a process through which the child participant assented to participate prior to showing up and again at the introduction of the course. At both stages, children (and caregivers) were provided with an overview of the pilot. Social workers from the local implementing partner were present on-site during the training in case a participant needed support.

A final group of 14 participants (even gender split) ages 13-17 participated in the training pilot in Mosul. The 4-day pilot training was led by Sajad Jiyad and Mehdi Shakarchi from Bridge, and Schadi Semnani from MEAC. The training was held at the Bytna Foundation premises in Old Mosul, a large and informal setting which offered the participants a relaxing atmosphere away from their day-to-day lives.

Curriculum Design

The aim of the curriculum was to provide an accessible introduction to social science research methodology. The curriculum drew from MEAC's qualitative research training modules, Bridge's youth research training curriculum, War Child UK's VoiceMore Handbook research module, and UNICEF participatory research resources, which include presentations, workshop and role play sessions, and quizzes, as well as discussions to design the focus group prompts. The integrated curriculum benefited from iterative feedback from technical steering group members.

The resulting curriculum and accompanying modules and activities were outlined in a PowerPoint (available in Arabic and English) and a workshop delivery script that were used by each facilitator. The curriculum included concepts, explanatory material, practical exercises, and discussion prompts. The curriculum PowerPoint featured 9 modules across 115 slides. It

[4] While many children impacted by the conflict in Iraq have lost years of schooling, and eventually such a training would need to be made more accessible to those with limited literacy or time in school, for the first pilot, the design was predicated on participants being able to read and having some education.

was designed to be delivered over 4 full days - 3 days of which focused on concepts and familiarization, group work and interactive exercises on research methodologies and 1 day of practice focus group discussions.

The curriculum modules were:

Module 1: What is Research?
Module 2: Introduction to Research Ethics
Module 3: How to Design Qualitative Research
Module 4: How to Conduct Focus Groups
Module 5: Conducting Successful Key Informant Interviews
Module 6: Navigating Sensitivities in Research
Module 7: Logistics of a FGD
Module 8: Analysing Qualitative Data and Adding Other Sources/Data
Module 9: Presenting Results for Impact and Communicating to Different Audiences

Following the four-day course, a few promising young researchers from the course were to be chosen to co-facilitate several focus group discussions with the other young people in the group. The rough plan was for four focus groups:

- Two with girls with perceived ISIL affiliation (co-facilitated by a girl graduate with perceived affiliation).

- Two with boys with perceived ISIL affiliation (co-facilitated by a boy graduate with perceived affiliation).

The goal of these co-facilitated discussions was to allow the young people more ownership over the conversations and related research outputs. It was envisioned that the youth participants would help choose and revise the discussion topics and guide the discussions.

Summary of the Pilot Training in Mosul and Key Findings

By a number of metrics, the pilot training program delivered in Mosul from 10-13 June to a group of 14 young Iraqis was a success. Generally, the participants engaged well with the materials,

the facilitators were able to deliver the bulk of the curriculum within the time allotted, and the program passed without any major negative incidents. The feedback from the participants and the social workers who accompanied them was positive. After the first day, a good rapport developed among the group and facilitators. The informal setting aided in encouraging the groups to engage in the program, a reflection of the fact that for young people in difficult circumstances, getting away from their day-to-day lives – even if they were with some people they knew – and being in a comfortable space helped them engage and relax.

The students found the material engaging and appeared to enjoy the sessions. By the end of the workshop, the students understood what research was, the main steps involved in research, different methodologies that they could use (specifically focus groups and key informant interviews), and basic ethical questions that arise when conducting research. They were able to devise simple research topics and specific questions relating to topic prompts. The students also understood that it was possible to consider a career as a "researcher," or apply these skills to other professional pursuits, and some were enthusiastic about those prospects.

Several challenges, however, arose as a result of a gap between the referral criteria and the young people who reported to the pilot training. First, it became clear that the boys and girls involved were not comfortable sharing the same space during the training and the boys needed to be separated from the girls. This forced the facilitators to adjust the layout and administration of the training, an eventuality the facilitators had planned for, but one that was nonetheless suboptimal. Second, there was a greater age distribution than expected. The girl's group included three 14-year-olds and four 17-year-olds. The boys' group included three 12-13-year-olds, one 14-year-old, two 15-year-olds, and a 17-year-old. The discrepancy - in both lived experience and cognitive/academic abilities – between the younger and older participants made it very difficult for both groups to be engaged in the same work or exercises. For example, the facilitators only briefly introduced *Module 8: Analysing Qualitative Data and Adding Other Sources/Data*, because most of the material was beyond respondent capacities. Third, an additional referral challenge occurred when it quickly became clear that one of the boys was from a Turkman background and was unable to read or write in any language and he spoke little Arabic (although it was never clear he could or if he was just painfully shy). Although he appeared to have a close friendship with one of the other boys, he was generally unable or unwilling to communicate, at times, seemed uncomfortable. Fourth, the goal had been to have older children who had returned from Northeast Syria in this pilot, but it became clear over the course of the pilot that all of the children were internally displaced Iraqis whose families were perceived as affiliated with ISIL, and one child had been detained in Iraq at some point for his own alleged affiliation with ISIL. While this was a related caseload, and the curriculum was very much in line with their experiences, this lack of clarity around the specifics of participant backgrounds made it difficult to nuance conflict-related prompts.

The differences in age, cognitive abilities and backgrounds posed a challenge but the facilitators adapted to address the needs of the participants in the room. The facilitators responded by shifting to more discussion-based activities and more practical exercises and adjusting the schedule to allow for more breaks. In response to the lack of clarity of the conflict profiles of the participants, the facilitators further eased their introduction of topics that dealt with challenges, peacebuilding and conflict. For example, the facilitators adjusted to curriculum to include a tour of a nearby museum to ease into a discussion on recent conflict. This allowed them to better observe how respondents reacted and engaged with starter conversations and evaluate whether they could proceed to the other topic prompts.

Flexibility was key in this regard. Even if the participants had fully matched the listed demographic profile requested, it is necessary to tailor the training to the actual participants who are in the room. This always requires adaptation. Not knowing people's experiences was especially difficult because it is harder to adapt to the sensitivities in real time and requires even more creativity and responsive flexibility.

The most important observations from the pilot include that many participants seemed uncomfortable talking about conflict-related issues and experiences in front of peers. For some of the group, it was too soon to talk about the conflict directly, although they were keen to discuss problems in their lives including sensitive subjects. The girl group, for example, wanted to discuss forced marriage. There were indications that the pain of their conflict experiences, however, were too recent (and for some current). There were also specific teenage dynamics at play - they do not trust their peers. This lack of trust has likely been exacerbated by years of conflict and the perception that the consequences of sharing experiences are too great – even when pains have been taken to craft those conversations in a safe way. All this undermined the value and safety of pursuing the actual focus group discussions on topics of interest (even when rendered child-sensitive) that were planned at the end of the pilot training programme. As a result, the facilitators shifted some of the research focus to key informant interviews. They had social workers role play as certain experts or high-ranking officials in certain research activities so that the children could conduct practice interviews with them. This was useful to highlight the differences between conducting research with e.g., young people and adult experts and officials. In addition, the facilitators held mock focus groups on non-sensitive issues (including an impassioned discussion on football in the boy group, as well as education and healthcare in Mosul), which helped illustrate research practices.

As stated above, there was a hesitation to discuss conflict-related issues in front of peers, yet it was also clear that particularly the girls needed a confidant. They had no one with whom to share and process their experiences. Several participants talked about their families as

unsupportive, even borderline abusive. Several girls described having mothers, but they didn't go to them on these issues. One girl said she did not want to burden her mother with her sadness. Without outlets at home or elsewhere, it is unsurprising that the girls in the group gravitated to the female facilitator as a trusted adult outside their social circles who were not in a position to sanction or betray them. She became a sympathetic repository for their stories when they had no other safe outlet. This duality of needing to share but not wanting to share under most circumstances highlights a fundamental challenge in doing reintegration programming (and the particular type of methodologies that can work in related participatory research). In this case, it is not that conflict-affected youth *can't* or *shouldn't* conduct such research, but rather what specific research activities make sense, and which do not. While it was clear from this experience that for this population direct engagement with peers on sensitive topics did not make sense, involvement in many other research activities was welcome and possible. When made accessible, these young people could help define research questions, inform research tools, and even participate in some types of data collection (e.g., possibly key information interviews) and contribute to the analysis.

While there are always concerns about retraumatizing people, MEAC's research in other countries highlights how little space conflict-affected people often have to process their experiences as they have no outlet to discuss these issues. The challenge is seeking a balance in wanting to ensure young people are engaged in action research that will impact policy and programming aimed at them, but without doing so in a way that re-traumatizes them or gets their hopes up in a way that cannot be sustained. So, it is imperative to balance concerns of re-traumatization and outlets to inform programming and policy (and inadvertently to process experiences). MEAC surveys – in Iraq and in the five other countries in which it works - always have a built-in cut-off directive for enumerators and psychosocial referral mechanism if a respondent shows signs of or expresses distress. This pilot benefited from the availability of social workers on site if discussions were upsetting to children. These are practices for dealing with the potential adverse effects of difficult interview questions or focus group discussions. What is rarely – if never – part of the planning for such activities is how to respond when a training intervention starts to become a therapeutic outlet for participants. Achieving this balance is discussed narrowly from a research and individual support perspective above, but the challenge there mirrors the larger question about peacebuilding efforts in Iraq: how much progress reintegration and peacebuilding interventions effectuate without investment in reconciliation?

Despite the challenges, overall, the pilot programme was informative and contributed substantively to the larger research project and participatory research methodology. Over the course of the training programme, it became clear that many of the young people's own experiences reflected those captured by MEAC's survey and other qualitative studies,

reinforcing the reality faced by returning Iraqi youth. In addition to these observations, there were a number of lessons learned that could help inform future iterations of this training or other efforts to conduct participatory research with young people impacted by conflict.

Lessons Learned and Considerations for Future Research Initiatives

Flattening Communication to Enhance Efficiency

This pilot ran into some of the typical challenges that come from trying to work with a number of partners across languages and time zones and under truncated timelines, which impacted not only pilot participation but other aspects of the training rollout. One of the lessons learned from this pilot beyond the universal import of creating clear and efficient communications in multi-partner projects, is the potential value of ***flattening the communications hierarchy. This can be especially important when it comes to local implementing partners on the ground. Flattening communications can help ensure everyone has the same information and understanding at roughly the same time and result in better recruitment processes.***

Integrating and Adapting Consent/Assent Process to Ensure Clear-eyed Participation

Clear communication is always important in the design and implementation of any intervention, but it is particularly so when the intervention at hand deals with sensitive issues and/or the participants come from a vulnerable population. Despite a clear and detailed consent (for caregivers) and assent (for underage participants) process that included a written overview and signature confirmation for participation, it was evident that not all participants arrived with a clear understanding of the training they had signed up for. In the initial session that introduced the project, some of the boys, when asked why they were participating, said: “awareness” (*taw’ia*) - a term that is associated with the process local security officials undertake as part of rehabilitation programming for boys and young men identified as ISIL affiliated returnees (often viewed as reeducation). This awareness gap among participants was likely caused by several

reasons: the young age of some of the participants (particularly the boys) and the types of programmes they have been exposed to; the nature of the recruitment process; and low literacy rates. Proper consent/assent procedures protect participants and their families and ensure an informed and interested group of participants. The pilot reinforced the need to be transparent and accessible when explaining the training at every stage (recruitment, consent/assent, introduction of training) so that parents, participants, and other stakeholders are clear about what is being delivered. ***There are three main lessons learned from this process, the first is the value of having consent/assent processes co-administered by facilitators and the local partners (and be multi-staged) to leverage the strengths of each partner to ensure all participants and their caregivers are completely clear on the purpose of the intervention.[5] Second, although research ethic guidelines – particularly from Western institutional review boards (IRBs) – prefer written consent processes, it is essential to have more accessible consent procedures to ensure non- or quasi-literate populations are fully informed about the intervention. Lastly, consent and assent procedures need to involve both caregivers and children in a balanced way, to ensure they do not play into age hierarchies and end up undermining children's agency in assenting to participate.***

Establishing Ground Rules to Ensure Everyone's Comfort and Safety

The pilot curriculum placed a great deal of emphasis on establishing ground rules for creating a respectful and safe environment for discussion and learning and encouraging engagement from different participants (e.g., particularly girls). One thing that was not fully anticipated was participants photographing the facilitators and potentially posting those pictures online. While this may reflect typical teenage behaviour who – as digital natives - share many aspects of their lives online, this plus requests for personal information and signatures from the facilitators were unnerving. ***Particularly given the security environment and sensitives at play in Iraq, future training of this sort needs to ensure the ground rules not only focus on the privacy and safety of participants but also that of facilitators and establish explicit photography and social media expectations.*** There is a balance that needs to be between transparency about such interventions, allowing young people to engage with them in a way that aligns with

[5] With hard to safely identify and reach populations, as in this case, there is enormous value to working with a local programming partner. Local partners can provide legitimacy to the process and build on existing relationships with local populations. Challenges can arise, however, due to the different nature of the work and inferred expectations by participants as they move from working with one organization to another as they move from recruitment to participation. During the course of the training, some participants mentioned that they were paid to attend programs with the local partner, and it may be that they considered the offer to join the pilot an obligation (or, although it wasn't said by participants, perhaps expected compensation to follow even though the consent form clearly stated that was not the case).

how they communicate, and ensuring that participants and facilitators are safe, and their privacy is respected.

Programming to the Participants You Have, Not the Ones You Want

The group of people that participated in this pilot did not meet the ideal criteria that were set out in the design of the training. The target demographic was boys and girls between the ages of 15-17, but the resulting participant group had a wider range of ages. This was a particular issue in the girls. Education levels varied, and although that was to be expected given that so many children had lost key years of school due to the conflict, not every participant was literate. Two days into the training it became clear that one boy did not even speak Arabic let alone read or write. While the goal had been to administer the main curriculum sessions together and do breakout groups by gender, it became clear that the participants were not comfortable in the same room and boys and girls would need to be completely segregated, even at breaks and lunch.

Beyond the criteria/curriculum design gap, working with this group posed other facilitation challenges. One participant was working a night shift before coming to the program, he was falling asleep during sessions, and he was covered in soot. In line with MEAC's other research findings, many boys have to work to help support their families, especially female headed households. Another boy was arrested after the first day and ended up missing 2 days of the program. Again, this reflects the findings of the research and the securitized approach to older boys with family members who were involved with ISIL. The accompanying absences and disruptions are suboptimal, but they are reflective of the realities faced by young conflict-affected children in Iraq.

The most important challenge with the referred participants was that the facilitators did not know enough about their conflict experiences and reintegration journeys to pre-emptively refine the conflict-related prompts. Given the sensitivities and concerns about re-traumatization, the facilitators were forced to go even more slowly in feeling out each participant and were cautious about addressing the ISIL period. This – combined with the younger than expected ages of some participants and the girls' reluctance to discuss deeply personal experiences in front of their peers – impeded progress on the *stated* research objectives – particularly with regard to addressing some of the conflict-related prompts and co-facilitating focus groups on reintegration experiences and/or perspectives. That said, the engagement

with young people complimented the survey and qualitative research MEAC has been running in Iraq since February 2022.

Overall, the facilitators performed admirably in accommodating the participants and managed to adapt the curriculum to be as accessible as possible. This was not without a great deal of work in the wings of the training sessions. Even if improvements in the recruitment process were made to ensure the resulting participant group better matched the ideal recruitment criteria, it is highly possible when working with conflict-affected youth, that such criteria gaps will continue. ***As a result, it may be useful to plan revision session time into the training schedule to allow facilitators to re-work aspects of the modules to accommodate the children they have in front of them. There are other ways to build in the additional capacity to allow for flexibility – For example, having additional facilitation support (with gender representation) on hand, and booking an additional room, to allow for further break out groups by age or to help particular children who are struggling with the material. While flexibility will always be required, more can be done to ensure the recruitment of a group of participants who will be well suited to engage with the training material and prepare for discussions with them – including sensitive ones. It is a difficult balance to strike in screening for recruitment criteria related to experiences without being too invasive. Finding that balance, however, can help reduce the risk of triggering participants or approaching sensitive topics with insensitivity, ensure facilitators can be more effective in their engagement, and enhance the insights that be drawn from these types of interventions.***

Proactively Building Adaptable Curricula

Beyond being flexible, it makes sense – where resources and time allow – to develop multiple versions of the curriculum to address the needs and abilities of younger and less educated/literate participants. This is extremely important for conflict-affected children and youth who have often lost years of schooling due to insecurity. Several girls also reported that they currently struggle in school now, being made fun of for being behind and discouraged from attending by their family members. Thus, many came to the training not only lacking the basic literacy and educational background desired but also the confidence to share their opinions and analysis. To programme successfully ***for younger children, this requires adjusting the depth, length, methods, and style and even the topics used for exercises and prompts. Younger children likely require shorter sessions, more physical activities, and breaks, to ensure they remain engaged. For older children who have limited literacy and schooling, the curriculum needs to be adapted to be made accessible, but with care not to infantilize the content. Efforts to build their self-confidence and encourage them are***

essential to helping them open up and share. Lessons can be drawn from remedial education for young adults. Having different versions of the modules and individual activities at hand allow the facilitators flexibility to adapt the training to participant needs, even when they only become fully clear at the training.

Pilot to Long-term Capacity Building

From the early days of planning this pilot, it was clear that it should not be an isolated event. Not that it had to be replicated per se, but that it shouldn't be untethered from a broader engagement plan with these participants. ***There is a recognition that a one-week training that helps build participants' research skills is positive, but the impact may fade without continued engagement and opportunities.*** The partners on the project are working to both close the feedback loop with the participants by sharing findings from the training (in an accessible way) and building enduring relationships and opportunities for them. Two options are being explored: engaging the participants in a private social media group for those who want to continue learning about research and/or serve as youth research partners in the future; and having some of the participants from the June 2023 pilot help plan and facilitate a follow-up pilot in Mosul in Q3 2023 or Q1 2024.

Moving forward it is worth trying to situate the next pilot training in the context of a longer-term engagement with conflict-affected youth. An earlier participatory research pilot launched by MEAC and War Child UK in the Central African Republic in 2019 highlighted that many conflict-affected children and youth have not had an opportunity to share their opinions and/or have them respected in public debates. Moreover, some of the linguistic frames around topics of interest to international partners don't necessarily exist or need to be married with relevant local concepts in order to ensure a fruitful dialogue. ***In contexts where young people's voices are not valued contributions to public debates and linguistic frames do not exist or are unaligned, investment is needed to create the conditions in which young people can fully and effectively engage in participatory action research activities or related trainings.*** This investment takes time and needs to be grounded in broader youth engagement efforts. Such an investment also allows time to get to know young people and their stories, which in turn can help ensure a capable and willing participant group will be invited to join participatory research activities.

Conclusion: Future Participatory Research with Conflict-Affected Young People

From a narrow reading of the pilot, this intervention of the training programme fell short of achieving all of its stated goals, most notably with regard to the planned co-facilitated focus groups to get young people's perspectives on peacebuilding and reintegration experiences. While the participants learned about research, and how to facilitate focus groups and other research techniques, they ultimately didn't co-facilitate discussions on the topic of most interest to the larger research project. Participant well-being was too important, and the feedback provided made it clear that pursuing such topics in focus groups would have been irresponsible. Yet, despite this, the pilot training programme was a success as it advanced MEAC research in Iraq substantively. As time went on, it became clear that the children who participated embodied many of the challenges and vulnerabilities that come through the survey research and focus group discussions that have been conducted outside this training. In addition, the pilot contributed to learning participatory research methodologies broadly, and in Iraq specifically, it clarified a potential next step.

Many of the children who participated in the pilot may be back in their community of origin (or settled in another community) but their situations are still precarious. Some have male relatives in prison and/or are being tried for ISIL membership. This makes it very hard for them to speak freely and they are distrustful about sharing in front of their peers. The real question is how to gather information from children about their needs, aspirations, and challenges in a way that doesn't force them to incriminate their families or render them even more vulnerable than they already are.

As an effort to close the feedback loop and build more sustainable engagement with participants, MEAC proposes a follow-up consultation with participants to gather further feedback about the training and share some observations from it with them. This could be followed by individual meetings with the older, particularly eager graduates, who could be asked privately, how they would design future efforts to engage young people like them to know more about their needs without exposing them up to further threats. This conversation could

also serve as an opportunity to hear from young people what types of sustained engagement for skills acquisition and participation in action research and policy debates are appealing to them.

If we are serious about effective engagement and treating young people as partners on the road to peace, then we need to be equally serious and committed to adapting our methods to their needs, we need to acknowledge what worked and what could work better, we need to listen to their feedback. And for it not to be tokenistic, we need to show up again, close the feedback loop, and build sustainable opportunities for them to be involved not just in action research, but in the policymaking and programming that will impact their lives.

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