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An Unfiltered View of Struggling to Find Peace: Photography Programme Pilot with Young People in Mosul, Iraq

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This Research Fieldwork Note provides a summary of a pilot programme undertaken by UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project in concert with its partners: [100cameras](#), Progress in Peace in Mosul, UNICEF's country office in Iraq, War Child UK, Bridge (Iraqi NGO and consultancy), and IOM's country office in Iraq, Iraq in June 2023. The pilot involved implementing a 100cameras programme with 19 young Iraqis, fostering self-connection and peer bonding while imparting visual storytelling skills, emotional processing, and community documentation through a custom photography and storytelling curriculum. The goal of the pilot was to ensure that young people in Iraq help inform action research on peacebuilding through the creation of images that represent several of the main themes of the larger research project. This action research will in turn inform policies and programming decisions that will impact the youth participants and their peers, and thus their involvement in this pilot, and other participatory research activities, are key to ensuring they have a voice in these discussions. Furthermore, the pilot sought to help participants build skills that can be used to advance a range of educational, and professional pursuits while also providing an outlet for enjoyable activities and play.

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 and those coming back from Northeast Syria, particularly children. Yet, existing efforts to assess and respond to youth reintegration challenges remain largely extractive, with young people's experiences and needs interpreted by adult researchers and practitioners, and engagement often tokenistic.

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

Overview of Pilot Intervention

The Pilot Intervention and 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 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. A separate report details the implementation of this research training intervention in Mosul, discusses lessons learned, and provides recommendations for implementing similar interventions in other contexts.

Several of the research themes designed to be explored in these focus groups with young returnees were also the subject of the second intervention - a participatory photography intervention by 100cameras and Progress in Peace in Mosul. This transformative programme 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.

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.

- **100cameras** – A global programme that utilizes photography and storytelling to teach youth how to process and share their experiences.
- **Progress in Peace** – (Iraqi NGO) Advocates for minority and vulnerable communities' rights and promotes peace around co-existence, cooperation, and inter-faith dialogue through education and engagement.
- **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 100cameras Curriculum Overview

100cameras operates globally with local partners to deliver a well-tested and proven photo voice methodology, focusing on enabling youth to process their experiences and express their thoughts and emotions in a way that uplifts their voices and perspectives. Through extensive research and collaboration with educators and community leaders around the world, 100cameras' programme addresses the challenges youth often face in using language alone to share their experiences, resulting in feelings of isolation and limited options for self-expression. By providing photography as a powerful tool for connection and communication,

100cameras' curriculum improves emotional intelligence, well-being, resilience, and community-building skills, allowing young people to view themselves as leaders. 100cameras has 15 years of experience implementing the customizable curriculum in places like India, South Sudan, the United States of America, Cuba, Colombia, Turkey, Vietnam, and Peru among others (85 total programmes to date) to help young people impacted by conflict, instability, and anxiety acquire the tools and skillsets to connect with their emotions, process their experiences, and share both through visual storytelling.

In collaborating with the MEAC project's research in Iraq, the 100cameras curriculum was thoughtfully adapted to address relevant research themes. Using group discussions, photography and storytelling activities, and reflective prompts, the programme allowed participants to contribute to UNIDIR's broader research project and enhance the ways in which research findings are communicated.

Summary of How Things Went



Photo 1: 100cameras facilitator photograph of students at the training in Mosul

The photography training programme was piloted in Mosul, Iraq from 4-8 June 2023 as a collaborative effort involving 100cameras; its local implementing partner, Progress in Peace; UNIDIR; UNICEF; and its local implementing partner. The programme targeted displaced youth who were perceived as ISIL affiliated and/or had returned from Northeast Syria. Nineteen young people – boys and girls ages 11 to 22 who lived in the surrounding area participated in the five-day programme in Arabic. It aimed to involve and equip these young people with visual storytelling skills and participatory research tools, supporting equally both the purpose of the 100cameras curriculum and the research goals of the Managing Exits from Armed Conflict project.

The programme participants engaged enthusiastically with camera functions and composition techniques. They created technically sound and emotive images that effectively conveyed multiple stories about themselves, their experiences, and their communities. Despite the sensitivity of the recent conflict, participants exhibited a remarkable willingness to engage in emotional processing and expressed their desire to share their life experiences. For instance,

after one class session, a group of girls expressed their desire to write or tell their personal stories, particularly recounting the experiences their families had endured. Excerpts from the reflections further illustrate the students' openness and vulnerability. For instance, an 11-year-old girl eloquently shared her aspirations as well as her hardship, reflecting on losses from the war, particularly the passing of her father and her determination to try and move forward and pursue her education and a career in medicine to support her family. A 17-year-old girl emotionally connected with a photo of a boy sitting alone in a field, reminiscing about her own difficult experiences after her father's passing. The photograph evoked strong feelings of sadness and stress and led her to share her heart-wrenching story of coping with the loss, the challenges and hardships her family endured, including losing their home and other family members. Overall, these instances demonstrate the profound engagement and emotional investment of the young Iraqis who participated in the programme, emphasizing the necessity for fostering environments conducive to healing, growth, and personal development.

The strength of the 100cameras curriculum and facilitators, the local partner organization, Progress in Peace (PIP), and the support of UNICEF's local partner, ensured a successful and meaningful programme for the youth participants and that the required government permissions were secured to allow students to express themselves and document their community by capturing photographs in public spaces. The latter hosted the training and provided administrative space, secure storage facilities, access to printers, and classroom facilities, which allowed for programme adjustments to take place as needs arose. There were also social workers available to assist participants' emotional well-being if needed.

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 (e.g., communication, logistics). These challenges, however, have outsized impacts given the securitized environment that the programme was rolled out in. For example, with a last-minute change in venue to accommodate the transportation logistics with the local organization managing student recruitment and delays in security clearances, there was less time to obtain information about the surroundings of the new class site, impeding proper planning to ensure photo walks took place in visually relevant environments. Acquiring the necessary government paperwork for the programme proved to be a significant challenge more broadly. There were challenges in procuring access and security clearances that led to a scramble by local partners to procure access permissions for the facilitating teams.

Delays in receiving a permission letter from the local government office to allow the youth participants to go on photo walks around Mosul required an adjustment of the programme curriculum. This involved re-translating and re-printing curriculum materials daily, as well as re-training facilitators daily to navigate the modifications made to lesson plans for the following

class day in a way that progressed the curriculum while maintaining emotional outlets and opportunities for fun. In addition to security clearance delays, the shooting of an impact video affected the course timeline and disrupted participation for those who were pulled aside for one-on-one interviews. The mismatch of having an adult directed video shoot for a participatory photography training with youth also raised questions regarding who was leading the community and individual narratives. Both the security delays and impact video contributed to limiting the time participants had to hone their visual storytelling skills and have the opportunities to pair their photography practice with all the prompts. The result was still a vibrant photo collection that is strong in both composition and narrative, albeit one that is truncated in size and scope.

Additional flexibility was required in facilitating the programme as the students recruited did not meet the eligibility criteria, specifically, their reading and writing levels did not meet the requested fourth-grade minimum requirement. This posed challenges during the programme's execution, particularly during writing assignments, as a portion of the students needed a facilitator to transcribe their answers one-on-one during each activity in the curriculum.

Running programming in highly securitized contexts with vulnerable and stigmatized young people is very difficult. Despite the challenges encountered in Mosul, this pilot was a success. First, the engagement with the participating youth – both in exercises and coursework and in informal moments over the course - provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by the children in Iraq and Mosul. The stories and perspectives shared, and their photography conveyed the profound impact of war, displacement, and limited access to resources on their lives. When asked to choose a photo that represented a low point in his life, a 17-year-old boy picked one of “a pole standing steadily, and despite the circumstances, it remained still.” Despite everything these young people have been through, their resilience and hope for the future shone through their expressions.



Photo 2: I., 17-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023.⁴

The intervention created a safe space to process these experiences and served as a platform for emotional healing – something the participants appeared to lack in their lives. One 17-year-old girl stated that for people like her, when times are difficult, she responded, “They need someone who can listen, and understand them and feels them.” It is also clear that the programme fostered a sense of community building among the participants. Research across 85 programs demonstrates that the 100cameras curriculum plays a pivotal role in establishing spaces for emotional expression and fostering trust among participants. The programme's intentionally designed and extensively tested approach effectively integrates storytelling and creative activities, cultivating a safe and engaging environment that encourages participants to openly share their experiences without judgment or expectations. Beginning with interactive and enjoyable activities that instil pride in acquiring new skills, the curriculum gradually guides participants towards connecting with their emotions and peers. Crucially, the programme never pressures youth to share their experiences, ensuring a supportive and non-intrusive atmosphere.

The programme's participatory approach, allowing participants to shape their stories and communities, cultivated a sense of confidence and self-assurance, empowering the youth to

⁴ Many of the young people who participated in this training – and their caregivers – assented/consented to attributing their names to the photos they took. In an effort to balance protection concerns, different levels of comfort with attribution, and providing attribution of artistic work, this report uses the photographer's first initial.

navigate the complexities of their lives with strength and determination. This was clear in the pre-programme and post-programme surveys, where shifts in optimism about their role in their community, pride, confidence to share, and a greater sense of agency were clear. One 16-year-old girl when asked at the beginning of the course if her perspective and life story matter to others, she responded, "Neutral". Her perspective had changed, and she answered her story was important, and it represents my confidence." She said, "I can express myself better now."

The impact of the pilot programme in Mosul was analysed across three critical areas: data collected from students' photography and storytelling skills, social-emotional development demonstrated through pre-course and post-course surveys, and the responses to curriculum activity prompts.

Pre-course and post-course surveys showed a positive change in metrics for social-emotional development, with a significant percentage of students showing increased belief in the significance of their perspectives and life stories (89 per cent), the belief that they can contribute to their surroundings (89 per cent), pride in sharing their perspectives (94 per cent), and recognition of their self-worth (94 per cent). This data underscores the programme's success in empowering and helping build the self-confidence of the participants.

The participants responded enthusiastically to the camera "tool-belt" techniques and composition principles covered in the programme, evident in their experimentation with different settings and composition styles. They demonstrated considerable growth in their ability to tell powerful and thoughtful stories through their images, effectively capturing narratives about themselves, their communities, and their relationship with Mosul and Iraq.

In conclusion, the challenges encountered during the programme were met with determination, collaboration, resourcefulness, and a proactive mindset by all partners. The pilot programme experience – and the challenges it encountered – resulted in several valuable lessons that can inform future partnerships and future efforts to engage young people in the research and storytelling around peacebuilding after conflict.

Lessons Learned and Consideration for Future Programmes

Value of Integrating Research and Photography + Storytelling Programming.

The integration of research and participatory programming, utilizing photography and storytelling, exemplified in the Mosul pilot programme, points to the value of breaking down programming silos. By thoughtfully incorporating MEAC's research themes into the curriculum activities, the programme not only yielded interesting insights but also helped build skills and support the empowerment of the young participants. This approach enabled candid and open responses from the students, showcasing the potential of participatory methods in communicating research findings in different ways while engaging impacted populations as partners.



Photo 3: A., 16-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023.

Moreover, this innovative approach served as a "living learning/serving model," as it effectively engaged young participants in exploring sensitive topics related to their experiences without being overly extractive. The programme demonstrated how meaningful learning experiences can occur while simultaneously benefiting the youth involved. The qualitative data showcases the positive effects of the approach, providing evidence of its impact on the participants' emotional growth, self-perception, and agency. For instance, when asked about sharing her perspective and story, a 15-year-old girl responded, "My feelings are happiness, thinking that someone in another country in this world will know about me and get to know my story because I need that!" This stands in contrast to her sentiment at the beginning of the course; when asked if she thought she could make a difference in her life and in her community, she had previously responded, "No!" Another 11-year-old girl expressed her belief in making a difference in her life and society through education and self-confidence, attributes she stated

that she developed through the programme. In comparing her pre- and post- course surveys, when given the prompt, "I feel that I can contribute to my surroundings", her response improved by +2 points.

The integration of research and participatory programming, supported by photography and storytelling, cultivates young people feeling seen, heard, and able to contribute within their communities. This approach emerges as a valuable and ethical method to conduct research that respects the well-being of young people and equips them with new tools to foster personal development and community engagement while contributing to both the substance of the research and the ways in which its findings are communicated. The Mosul pilot programme's success makes a compelling case for this approach, demonstrating its potential for implementation in various contexts.

Youth Need Connection and Outlets

Implementing the course in Mosul highlighted the dearth of outlets young Iraqis have for processing their conflict experiences and current struggles. It was clear that participants had few such opportunities in their daily lives – for mental health support, to express themselves, and to have a voice in telling the story of their families and community. When asked what young people like him need to help them when times are difficult, one boy replied, “To be heard is what they need.” One of the classroom facilitators recalled that one of the girls was particularly taken with the journal she was provided to respond to curriculum prompts, she said “This one is so different. I had the same kind of journal, but I do not write in it a lot. This one is so different. All that is in my heart is in this journal.”

Pre-course and post-course surveys, along with responses to curriculum activity prompts, showed increased belief in the importance of their perspectives and life stories, pride in sharing their perspectives, and a sense of self-worth in challenging situations. The programme fostered emotional intelligence and resilience among boys and girls. Gender observations revealed that the participatory approach resonated with both male and female participants, fostering trust and camaraderie. This is evident through observing the levels of participation which revealed similar depths of engagement during group discussions, curriculum activities responses, and photography sessions across both participant groups, which were split by gender.

Ongoing Outlets Are Desired

The positive impacts of the programme are clear, but the question is how they can be sustained. Young people in Mosul are not seeking merely a one-off intervention; rather, they desire enduring pathways for connection, self-expression, and engagement. This is evident in their requests to continue the programme, to connect after the programme, and their expressed

desire to continue to be asked about their lives. One of the classroom facilitators recalled that one of the girls asked her “Can you all be with us next week or a month or stay with us forever? We needed you. It is our first time to open up.” A commitment to enduring connections is essential for fostering long-term empowerment and positive change in the lives of young individuals impacted by the war in Iraq.

Programming for Success

To navigate some of the inevitable challenges with this type of programming, it is essential to build strong relationships with local partners, have clear communication channels with all stakeholders, and build redundancy to allow facilitators to flexibly respond to the realities of the operating environment. One way to do this is to extend the programme duration to 6-10 days, to allow for a hybrid curriculum approach that can address unexpected challenges, such as delays in government approvals or weather-related issues. Building relationships with the local organizations involved in advance and improving communication among stakeholders will enhance programme implementation and support, ensuring a more informed and proactive approach to address specific needs and goals. Additionally, expanding the budget to accommodate a larger onsite support team and more facilitators will enable prompt and effective responses to real-time challenges, while also providing the necessary support to host more students and accommodate students with varying reading and writing levels. Moreover, advanced planning and improved communication will streamline research outputs and eliminate potential obstacles, such as limited time for community documentation, delays in government paperwork, and issues with participant criteria. By addressing these considerations and adopting an inclusive approach to hosting students from diverse backgrounds, programmes can create a safe and respectful space for emotional expression and learning.

Moving Forward

In summary, this pilot programme was a success despite the challenges presented. It is clear that the children who participated demonstrated enhanced resilience, confidence, and self-worth. The question is how to build on this foundation, scale up these types of programmes and create more outlets for emotional processing and creative storytelling for conflict-affected young people. The lessons learned from this pilot offer some insights into how to move forward, both in this particular community and more broadly.



Photo 4: K., 17-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023.

Maintaining Participant Networks and Engagement

Recognizing that untethered one-off programming may not produce sustained results the project partners will seek to build a connection and communication component for the programme participants from the pilot programme in Mosul as well as for future programs. Current ideas to be discussed with the youth participants include a private Facebook group or private online channel for sustained engagement. Many of the students were using social media platforms already, and this could be a natural way to continue to foster their connections and provide future photography prompts. Additionally, if technology and Wi-Fi structures and security concerns accommodate, a group discussion on Zoom could be hosted quarterly.

De-siloing Programming for Young People

This pilot demonstrated the value of stepping out of the confines of narrow programming for young people. Research and emotional resilience rarely intersect, and yet there is real value to exploring this type of model when doing participatory research with young people (and possibly when running artistic programming with young people who are marginalized in policy discussions that affect them). From a research standpoint, it is very difficult to engage young people directly in conflict-related discussions. Doing so indirectly through a broader programme primarily focused on skills development, resilience building, and expression is potentially a safer and more ethical approach. It ensures the process is not primarily extractive, as the main focus is on benefiting the youth participants. Such an approach is also fun and well-suited to young people's energy and concentration levels.

Elevate Youth to Co-creators of Communications Outputs

Exploring youth-led or co-led options for participatory communications outputs, such as an impact video, behind-the-scenes photographs, and/or participant-led interviews, ensures that the entire intervention is grounded in participatory principles. Involving the youth directly in the creation and production of these outputs fosters a sense of ownership and agency, making their perspectives and stories more authentic and representative. By nurturing their skills in storytelling, technology, and visual expression, an inclusive approach further contributes to their personal and professional growth and can amplify the impact of the programme within their communities.



Photo 5: B., 16-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023.

When the youth participants were asked what peace meant to them, many of them spoke of the ability to walk through the streets without fear, to greet – and be greeted by - their neighbours with kindness, and the opportunity to pursue their aspirations. When they took photos to try to capture moments in their lives, they often spoke of the feeling of peace captured on film. Images were taken of the river, flowers, trees, and clean streets with adults looking out for them. The young Iraqis who graduated from the programme left more confident of their place in a new peaceful Iraq. A 13-year-old girl stated, “ Now I can feel confident for expressing myself after this course... I can make a difference in my life in the future because the course encouraged me to achieve more with confidence through photography or in real life.”

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