

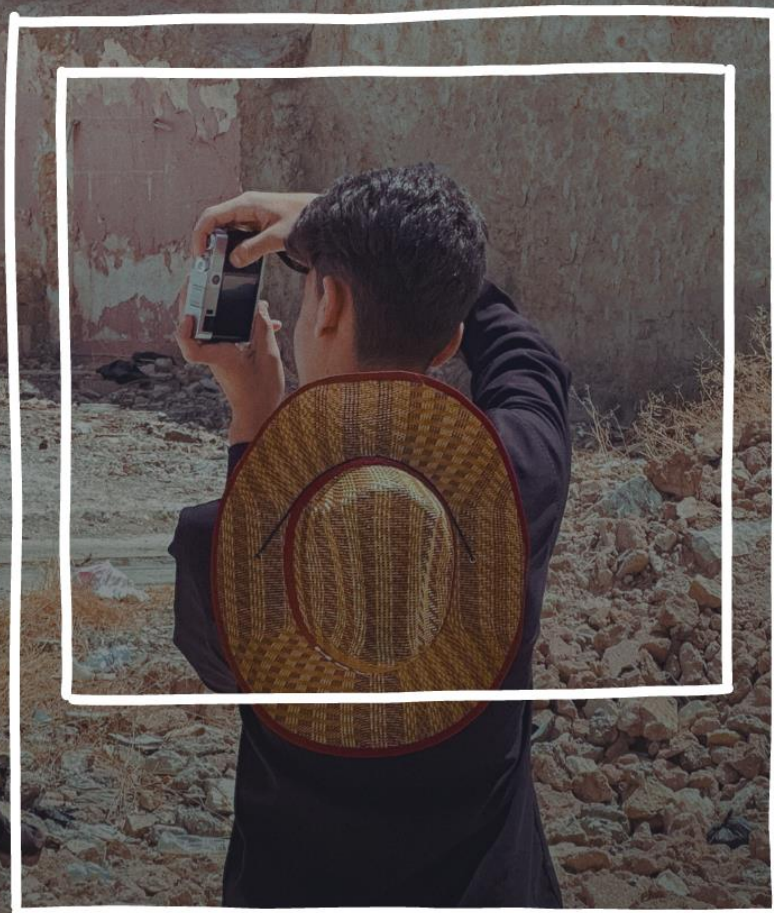


**UNIDIR**  
UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTE  
FOR DISARMAMENT RESEARCH

**MANAGING EXITS  
FROM ARMED CONFLICT**

# SHIFTING THE FOCUS

**INSIGHTS FROM CONFLICT-AFFECTED CHILDREN  
AND YOUTH ON PEACEBUILDING AND RECOVERY**



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This Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNIDIR’s Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the Findings Report benefited from feedback from MEAC’s donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

**Citation:** Anamika Madhuraj with Angela Popplewell, Lydia Billings, JP Pullos, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Fati Abubakar, Muqadas Samarrai, Schadi Semnani, Kyle Johnson, Ángela Gomez, Zina Hanna, Ahmed Khaleel, Erika Fernández Yule, Harles Rene Gembuel Pechene, “Shifting the Focus: Insights from Conflict-affected Children and Youth on Peacebuilding and Recovery,” UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.37559/MEAC/24/07>



*Photo 1: Facilitator photographs of participants in Nigeria, Colombia and Iraq*

## Key findings

- **Shared Struggles Across Contexts:** Across Nigeria, Iraq, and Colombia, participants recounted experiences of coercion into armed groups, displacement, and victimization. Many face ongoing challenges in their reintegration and highlighted the critical need for family support, access to education, and livelihood opportunities to aid their recovery.
- **Photography is a Tool for Engagement and Emotional Expression:** Photography emerged as a powerful medium for expression, enabling participants to process and communicate emotions and conflict experiences. This creative approach provided an indirect way to allow young people to discuss difficult things and share their perspectives; it served as a compliment to traditional research methods.
- **Young Voices for Peace and Change:** The programme highlighted that conflict-affected young people are not passive victims but can be proactive agents for change. Participants laid out their vision for a peaceful future and provided specific recommendations for investing in education, economic opportunities, psychological support, and environmental conservation to allow their generation to achieve it.

# Background

## About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The MEAC project benefits from generous support from UNICEF; the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO); Global Affairs Canada (GAC); the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; and is run in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM); the UN Development Programme (UNDP); UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); the World Bank; and United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR).

## About this Report

This report describes a participatory research programme that MEAC, 100cameras, War Child, UNICEF and its local partners ran with conflict-affected children and youth in Nigeria, Iraq, and Colombia in 2024.<sup>1</sup> This programme encompassed a multi-media integrated training to equip participants with photography and research skills and the space to process their experiences and build their network. Ultimately, the goal of this programme was to elevate their voices into policymaking discussions that will ultimately impact them and their peers. The purpose of this report is twofold: first, to offer an overview of the programme's implementation, including the curriculum design, participant experiences, and key lessons learned; and second, to serve as a resource for decision-makers and practitioners seeking to adopt child- and youth-centred participatory research and programming approaches in conflict-affected settings.

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<sup>1</sup> Participants across the three contexts primarily ranged in age from 14 to 25, with 3 older participants (ages 30+) in Colombia. For consistency and simplicity, all will be referred to as children and/or youth or young people throughout the report.

# Introduction

Today, children in conflict endure prolonged displacement; lack access to essential services such as food, medical care, and education; and are often subjected to violence and recruitment by armed groups. The profound suffering experienced by young people in conflict is undeniable, yet finding the most effective ways to protect and support them continues to be a challenge.

Many conflict-affected youth are overlooked, wrongly seen as complicit in violence, and stigmatized. Too often, they are stripped of their rights and are rarely given the opportunity to shape policies that affect them. Their experiences are often filtered through the perspectives of adults rather than expressed directly by the youth themselves. This participatory intervention sought to change that. By engaging young people directly, it aimed to go beyond tokenistic involvement, equipping them with skills and platforms for expression, and helping to inform policy and programming based on their realities. It also challenges the stigmas they face and highlights the value of participatory research in policy development, amplifying their voices within international peacebuilding efforts.

The MEAC project was established to strengthen the evidence base around the pathways into and out of conflict, with the ultimate goal of informing interventions that better address the needs of young people in these environments. Acknowledging that traditional policy research and assessments related to youth in conflict zones often tend to be extractive and tokenistic,<sup>2</sup> MEAC has made it a priority to advance participatory approaches with children and youth in the contexts where it works. These approaches complement quantitative and qualitative research methods (e.g., panel surveys, focus groups) by ensuring that conflict-affected young people, who often do not have a voice in policy decision-making, are actively involved in shaping the design, implementation, and recommendations of policy research that will inform policy and practice that in turn can impact them and their peers.

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Hart, 'Children's Participation: From tokenism to citizenship,' *Innocenti Essays*, No. 4 (UNICEF, 1992).

# Background

## 2023 Pilot

In 2023, working with [100cameras](#), [War Child UK](#), [UNICEF](#), [IOM](#), and Iraqi NGOs [Bridge](#) and [Progress in Peace](#), MEAC launched two participatory pilot programmes in Mosul to engage Iraqi youth whose families are perceived to be ISIL-affiliated and who are reintegrating into their communities after a period of displacement. The first pilot programme was a transformative photography intervention, through the 100cameras curriculum, that allowed youth to process their emotions and share their experiences through the lens of a camera. The second pilot was a research training programme that sought to empower young people to co-produce research. The resulting photographs and reflections of the participants were featured in an exhibition and dialogue hosted by UNIDIR and its partners during the [Geneva Peace Week](#) in November 2023.

## 2024 Expansion

Building on this effort, in 2024, MEAC, in conjunction with 100cameras and various local partners detailed below, embarked on an ambitious expansion of this work. The expanded tripartite, comparative programme involved conflict-affected children and youth across three contexts: Colombia, Nigeria, and Iraq. This expanded programme was designed to enhance the agency of participants in determining the specific subjects discussed and the outputs produced. For this tripartite programme, MEAC worked with a constellation of local partners to allow for the possibility of follow-up engagement with the participants beyond the five-day training programme. MEAC specifically identified local organizations that are capable of sustaining engagement and potentially integrating these participants into their own programmes and initiatives. In line with this commitment, in Iraq, a graduate from the 2023 pilot training returned in 2024 to help facilitate the new programme, supporting classroom discussions and assisting the new cohort. This highlights MEAC's dedication to creating ongoing opportunities for participants to apply and build on the skills they acquired through the training.

This report serves as a detailed account of the participatory programme in Colombia, Nigeria, and Iraq, emphasizing how creative outlets like photography and research training can empower these young individuals to share their stories and contribute to peacebuilding efforts. It also features participant photographs, identified only by their first initial and age for protection reasons. By amplifying the voices and lived experiences of these young people in conflict, the

report offers crucial insights for policymakers aiming to create more inclusive, youth-centred approaches to policy and intervention. Structured into three main sections: first, a review of the methodology and curriculum; second, an introduction to the contexts where the programme was rolled out; and third, an overview of programme implementation and participant experiences. It concludes with key insights into how the programme equipped participants with practical skills and emotional resilience while amplifying their voices in policy discussions. Ultimately, this report serves as a resource for decision-makers, highlighting the value of engaging young people directly in policy processes, offering practical strategies for integrating their perspectives into global peace and security efforts and providing practical examples of how to engage them effectively in these critical conversations.



*Photo 2: Facilitator Photograph of participants at the training in Mosul*

# Methodology, Curriculum Design and Implementation

The participatory intervention, led by different consortiums of partners in each context, encompassed a comprehensive five-day training programme focusing on photography and research skills aimed at providing participants with the tools to articulate their experiences and contribute to policy discussions affecting their lives.

## **Research Training**

Recognizing that many participants had lost key years of schooling - and some had never had access to formal education, this section of the programme aimed to equip participants with very basic research skills. The curricula covered why research was important, research ethics, different types of research, how research could be employed to inform policy and practice, and the types of educational and professional pursuits that would be aided by having research skills. The research modules ultimately sought to prepare the participants to interview their peers and to have discussions about the challenges they have faced, what types of support could help people like them, and what messages they want to share with leaders.

## **Photography/Videography Training**

Drawing on 100cameras' years of experience in working with children and youth who have faced adversity in a range of contexts, this aspect of the intervention focused on equipping children with photography and some basic videography skills, including composition, light, subject, point of view, amongst others. New iPhones were provided by Apple to support the video component of the program

The goal of the photography curricula was to help them process their emotions, express their experiences, and create images and videos that capture the themes explored in the research component of the programme. Photo walks and field trips to participant-selected locations were also central to the photography training, allowing participants to explore their neighbourhoods and respond to different prompts by capturing inspiring images. The cameras used during the training were gifted to the communities or participants (after consultations to ensure equity and manage any protection issues), enabling participants - and others - to continue honing their photography skills and sharing their stories.



The integrated curricula were adapted based on iterative feedback from local partners to fit cultural contexts and participant needs. Daily modules blended photography and research, offering hands-on activities such as peer interviews, group exercises, discussion prompts, and storytelling sessions.

### **Structure of the 5-day Programme**

Over the five days, participants engaged in both photography and research training through 100cameras and MEAC.

- Day 1 introduced photography techniques such as composition and storytelling while the research session covered fundamentals, defining and explaining the uses for research.
- Day 2 expanded on photography with basic camera techniques, featuring both group and individual activities, while the research session focused on types of research and research techniques.
- Day 3 focused on emotional expression, with participants using self-portraiture to explore a "Range of Feelings." Meanwhile, the research sessions addressed research ethics, including consent, security, and confidentiality.
- Day 4, the "Map My Story" exercise allowed participants to visually map and document their personal narratives, while the research module guided them through conducting peer interviews, emphasizing the importance of consent and flexibility.
- Day 5 focused on portrait photography, encouraging participants to explore themes of identity and emotion. The programme concluded with a collaborative session where participants planned and led on developing an impact assessment video, a new initiative for 2024 that empowered children and youth to document and reflect on their own experiences throughout the program.

A unique strength of the programme was its participant-led approach, where youth actively shaped the discussions and outputs, including a collaborative video project that reflected their experiences and artistic vision. By leading the filming, photography, and interviews featured in the video, participants took ownership of how their stories and the messages they want to share with policymakers and practitioners whose decisions impact their lives.



Photo 3: Facilitator Photograph of participants at the training in Cauca

### **Safeguarding Participants and Adapting to Local Contexts**

MEAC's participatory intervention prioritized the protection and informed consent of participants, ensuring that they and their caregivers understood the voluntary nature of the programme. To ensure accessibility, a verbal consent process was used for participants with limited literacy and to reduce security risks should they be viewed by current armed group members. Numerous steps were taken to build trust and allow participants to decide what experiences to share. In Nigeria, pre-engagement events allowed participants to meet facilitators beforehand, helping to ease them into the programme. In some contexts, rather than ask directly about the conflict, the curricula were adapted to back end into such themes and allow participant ownership over the direction of the discussion (as well as co-creators of visual outputs like photographs and videos that came out of the programme), giving them a sense of control over their narratives.

The programme was adapted in each location in order to be culturally sensitive and flexible enough to accommodate the capacities of the participants. In Nigeria and Iraq, many participants had missed years of schooling, so visual aids replaced written prompts to accommodate low literacy levels. In Colombia, the programme incorporated indigenous traditions and knowledge into the curriculum, by exploring the role of the *Kiwe Thegnas* (indigenous guard) and visiting the Tulpa, a sacred Nasa site, where participants gathered

around the fire to connect with spiritual leaders through photography and storytelling. This culturally embedded approach ensured that the training resonated with participants' identities and lived experiences, fostering deeper engagement.

### **Adapting to Operational and Security Contexts for Participant Protection**

The programme was carefully adapted to address security concerns in each region, ensuring the safety of participants and facilitators. In Colombia, clashes between dissident groups and state forces, led to incidents on local roads, shortening the training schedule. Although the indigenous guard provided security, the presence of armed groups like the Frente Dagoberto Ramos created implementation challenges (and reinforced the complexities of disengagement for participants that came up in discussions). Despite these hurdles, participants found the programme to be a valuable outlet for healing and self-expression. Meanwhile, in Nigeria, improving conflict dynamics allowed for successful Photo Walks, which would have been impossible just a year prior. One participant initially opted out due to fear of being recognized but later chose to join, demonstrating a growing sense of trust and safety as the programme progressed. The environmental context also necessitated programme adjustments. In Iraq, a heatwave prompted schedule changes and additional precautions to safeguard participants during outdoor activities. In Nigeria, fluctuating inflation complicated resource allocation, but the programme adapted to maintain smooth operations.

By integrating research, emotional resilience, and creative expression, the programme moved beyond - while complementing - traditional research methods. This approach proved to be safer and more effective when engaging conflict-affected young people who are often reticent or unused to sharing their experiences and perspectives. This holistic method ensured that the programme was not only focused on data extraction but also centred on the personal growth, enrichment, and empowerment of the participants.

### **Gender Dynamics in Classroom**

In Nigeria and Iraq, classrooms were separated by gender, in recognition of cultural sensitivities and participant preferences. This approach fostered full participation from all involved and inculcated a safe environment where participants could candidly share their stories and build camaraderie with their peers. In Colombia, however, splitting the group by gender was not feasible, as only one woman participated on the first day, with two more joining later in the week. This led to some instances where unequal gender dynamics became apparent, and facilitators actively worked to ensure the participation of women and girls.



# Overview of the Participatory Intervention in the North East of Nigeria

*Photo 4: Facilitator Photograph of participants at the training in Maiduguri*

This section provides an overview of the 2024 participatory intervention in the North East of Nigeria, which included children and youth who had previously been associated with one of the Boko Haram factions<sup>3</sup>. This section outlines the participant experiences and key insights from the first phase of the participatory programme.

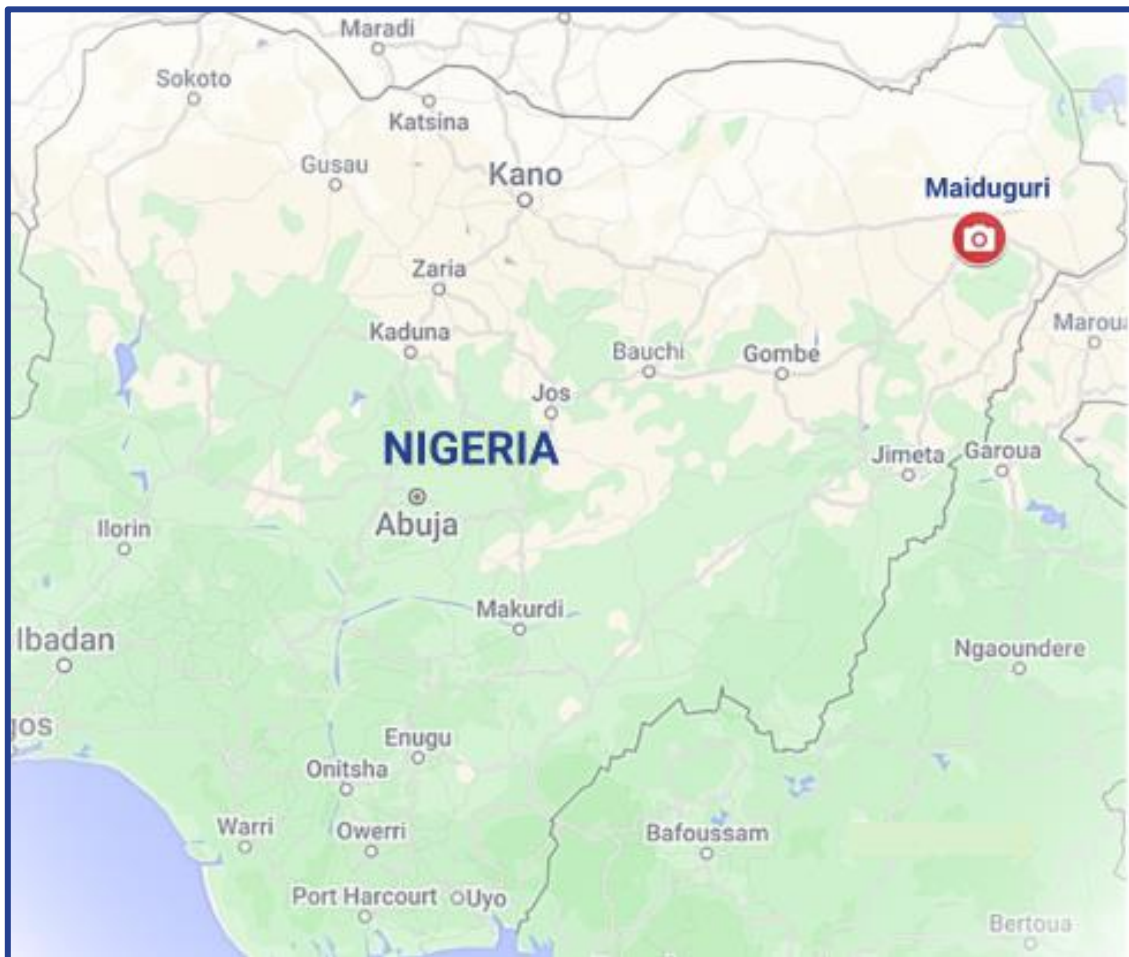
## **Context**

The Boko Haram crisis, ongoing since 2009, has resulted in widespread displacement, violence, and a severe humanitarian crisis in the North East of Nigeria. Thousands of children were forcibly recruited by Boko Haram, lived in harsh conditions in the bush, were deprived of education and stability, and either lost loved ones or were separated from them. Following the

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<sup>3</sup> The authors recognize that Boko Haram is sometimes considered a derogatory name for the group and is not the name used by the different factions itself. However, recognizing that the name Boko Haram is often used by local populations as an umbrella name – although this varies by geography and interaction – this report will use Boko Haram to encompass both factions. When reference is made to a specific faction, this will be clearly indicated, and the names (Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) will be used.

death of factional leader Abubakar Shekau in 2021 and internal conflict within Boko Haram, over 160,000 individuals exited areas controlled by the group. Some participants in this programme were among those who surrendered during this mass exit; all of the young people who participated bypassed formal reintegration support.<sup>4</sup>



### **Programme Schedule and Participant Details**

Between 17-21 April 2024, MEAC partnered with [100cameras](#), [Mobukar Consultancy](#), and [Kanem Creative](#) to initiate the first phase of the global programme in Maiduguri in Borno State, Nigeria. This intervention engaged a cohort of 16 young Nigerians (eight girls and eight boys) aged 14-19, who were formerly associated with Boko Haram and its factions (JAS and ISWAP) and bypassed formal reintegration support when they exited their group. All of them are

<sup>4</sup> Ndahi Marama, “[Over 160,000 Boko Haram terrorists have laid down arms – Gov Zulum](#)”, *Vanguard*, 28 November 2023.

currently internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in IDP camps or in the host communities of Konduga, Bama, and Maiduguri.

### **Key Insights from Participant Experiences**

When participants shared their experiences, several key highlights emerged (which are recounted in detail in MEAC's report "*Picturing Conflict: Child Perspectives from Their Time with Boko Haram and their Exit Journeys*"). Many spoke of being coerced into joining the Boko Haram factions, enduring abductions, and living in harsh, isolated conditions in the bush. Girls, in particular, faced forced marriages with Boko Haram fighters and endured sexual violence, often remaining with their husbands even after their exit from the group due to economic dependency. Some participants noted the dual role of Community Security Actors (CSAs), which, while meant to protect from Boko Haram violence, were at times responsible for pushing them into the group in the first place or had been manipulated for personal vendettas by community members. Family acceptance was repeatedly emphasized as vital for reintegration into civilian life and for facilitating broader community acceptance, especially when they had not received formal support. Participants also stressed that their immediate needs upon leaving the group included essentials like shelter, clothing, and food. Some children continue to struggle with unmet basic needs even years after their exit. They also encounter substantial barriers to accessing education and sustainable livelihoods, which participants highlighted as crucial for long-term recovery.

# Overview of the Participatory Intervention in Iraq



*Photo 5: Facilitator Photograph of participants at the training in Mosul*

This section highlights the participatory programme in Iraq, focusing on the experiences of youth displaced by the conflict with ISIL. The main takeaways emphasize the profound impact of war and displacement on these young people, many of whom face stigma and challenges upon returning home. This section will explore the context of the Iraq programme and key insights from participants on their needs, experiences, and resilience.

## **Context**

By the time the war with ISIL ended in December 2017, there were some 5 million Iraqis displaced within the country. Additionally, tens of thousands of Iraqis—many of them children—had languished in Al-Hol Camp in Northeast Syria or were refugees in Syria before returning home. For many who have returned, the journey home has not been easy. While all IDPs and returnees 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 affiliation (real or perceived) of a family member.



### **Programme Schedule and Participant Details**

Between 23-27 June 2024, MEAC alongside [100cameras](#), [Progress in Peace](#), and [Mosul Heritage Foundation](#) embarked on the second phase of the global initiative in Mosul, Iraq. This intervention targeted 16 young Iraqis, aged 15-19 (eight boys and eight girls) who were displaced during the war and now face stigma and difficulties in their communities.

### **Key Insights from Participant Experiences**

Participants vividly described the devastation of war and displacement, recounting the loss of loved ones and the hardships they endured. Many viewed this period as the lowest point in their lives. Even today the participants in Iraq struggle under the shadow of the conflict. One girl



shared her deeply personal story of losing her father and four brothers to the war and being further ostracized due to her family's perceived affiliation with ISIL, which created hurdles to her attending school and rejoining society. Despite these struggles, they expressed aspirations for stability, education, and the rebuilding of Mosul. Years of schooling lost to the conflict have left many with minimal literacy. Participants perceived as members of ISIL-affiliated families face further challenges in returning to school, including school officials reticent to allow them to attend or challenges associated with a lack of documentation, which deepens their frustration. For these youth, family serves as a critical source of stability, offering a sense of "home" amid the chaos. They also emphasized the need for emotional support and a society free from violence and instability.

# Overview of the Participatory Intervention in Colombia



*Photo 6: H., 24-years-old [Cauca, Colombia]*

This section focuses on the participatory intervention in Jambaló, Cauca Department, Colombia, where indigenous communities continue to face challenges related to the presence of armed dissident groups. It outlines the structure of the intervention, participant demographics, and key insights into the experiences and challenges of young people in this region, particularly around reintegration and security.

## **Context**

Despite the signing of the 2016 Peace Agreement with the FARC-EP, Colombia continues to struggle with ongoing security challenges, especially in regions where state presence is weak. While the FARC-EP laid aside weapons, the rise of dissident groups and criminal organizations vying for control over their former territories of influence has upended the lives of many rural populations. In the Cauca Department in Colombia, the home of the Nasa indigenous community, these dynamics have had a significant impact on children and youth.

In the region, FARC dissident groups, and specifically the Dagoberto Ramos Front, recruit young people for marijuana and coca production. Those who disengage from the groups face threats of retribution. A significant number of children have been offered the opportunity to enter the "Recomponer el Camino de Vuelta a Casa" (rebuilding the path home) reintegration process, a community-led initiative established by the Nasa community in northern Cauca in 2007, even before the 2016 peace agreement. This process provides a pathway for the individual reintegration of Nasa children after their affiliation with the former FARC-EP and current dissident groups. However, young adults often do not have access to these programs; having aged out of support leaves them vulnerable and sometimes forcing them to flee their villages to live a more clandestine life in urban centres like Popayán or Cali.



### **Programme Schedule and Participant Details**

Between 29 July - 02 August 2024, MEAC worked with [100cameras](#), [War Child Colombia](#), [the Conflict Responses Foundation](#) (CORE), and the Nasa Indigenous Youth Movement

(Movimiento Juvenil Álvaro Ulcué Chocué) to launch the third phase of the participatory programme in Cauca, Colombia. This intervention engaged a diverse group of 16 participants from the indigenous Nasa community (three girls and young women, and 13 boys and young men). Nine participants were between the ages of 17-25, three between 27-29, two between 30-49, one participant was 52 years old, and one participant did not share their age. In Nasa culture, the concept of "youth" is defined less by age and more by community roles and responsibilities. Enforcing strict age limits would have excluded those who, despite being older, are still active in youth movements. Therefore, the programme included some older participants than in Iraq or Nigeria to accommodate this cultural context and ensure inclusivity, while fostering broader engagement.

The participants included three ex-members of the FARC-EP, which had signed the 2016 peace agreement, one ex-member of a dissident group, and several individuals who were believed to have worked in coca leaf or marijuana plantations on behalf of armed groups. Some participants had also run errands for armed groups, including trafficking, but did not feel fully linked to them. Additionally, two young women and one girl attended. This diverse group of participants reflects the complex social and cultural dynamics in Cauca, where the challenges of reintegration and the risks of continued conflict are deeply intertwined. Insecurity and family and economic demands made it difficult for some participants to participate fully.

### **Key Insights from Participant Experiences**

Affiliation with armed groups in northern Cauca exists on a spectrum, from working in coca plantations to running errands for dissident groups, which does not necessarily lead those involved to identify as a group member or associate. Participants highlighted how violence has intensified since the Colombian government's peace talks with the dissident Estado Mayor Central (EMC) group, leading to increased and ongoing insecurity in the region. Many expressed their desire for technical training and agricultural opportunities to rebuild their lives after the pandemic, which was a major disruption. Family and community ties were seen as crucial for navigating these hardships, with many participants viewing peace as something that starts within the family and community, which are key aspects to ensure harmony within the Nasa community.



*Photo 7: Facilitator Photograph of participants at the training in Mosul*

## Observations from the Classroom

### **Participant Engagement and Creative Expression**

Throughout the programme and across the different countries, participants were highly engaged, quickly grasping composition techniques and demonstrating creativity in using camera skills to tell personal stories. In Nigeria, for example, one child captured close-up shots of their hands engaging in their favourite hobby, cap knitting, to showcase their passion and skills. Another child experimented with lighting to represent different personality traits, using a bright image to express happiness and a dark one to signify sadness. Yet another child planned to photograph their family, placing their mother at the center to depict a story of maternal strength and family unity. These examples highlight the children's imagination and storytelling abilities through photography. Participants also enjoyed the interactive research elements, including creating and practicing surveys, conducting qualitative interviews, and role-playing, with facilitators adapting activities to ensure everyone's full and equal participation.

## Research Interests Expressed by Participants

The research session began with an exercise prompting participants to create their own research questions to address issues important to them. In Iraq, the girls focused on the state of education in Mosul, the lack of basic services in certain areas, gender disparities within families, and street harassment, while the boys explored the causes of poverty, substance abuse, and ways to improve Mosul's education system. They practiced refining these broad themes into specific research questions and discussed whom they could interview to learn more about their chosen subjects. In Colombia, participants gravitated toward environmental themes, community resilience, and personal identity. Participants also used photography to explore these themes, capturing the beauty of their surroundings and the harmony within their communities. Through their research and photography, the participants aimed to highlight the interconnectedness between their personal experiences and the broader environmental and social contexts they inhabit.

*Photo 8: E., 25 years old [Cauca, Colombia]*



### **Opportunities to Practice Concepts**

Participants applied ethical principles through practical exercises throughout the programme. In Nigeria, participants practiced obtaining consent during a photo walk to the market. In Iraq, the participants engaged in exercises using Excel to create charts and other visual elements from data collected during the programme, reinforcing their understanding of basic quantitative analysis. In each programme, participants practiced interviewing each other in line with ethical research standards and discussing ways to enhance data privacy and confidentiality.

### **Facilitating Emotional Reflection and Storytelling**

The "Map My Story" activity was a pivotal component of the programme, serving as both a creative and deeply emotional exercise for the participants. This activity required participants to map out significant moments of their life journeys, allowing them to reflect on their experiences, challenges, and growth. For many, this was the first time they had the opportunity to process and articulate these personal stories. Understanding the emotional weight of this task, the facilitators took an active role in setting the tone and building confidence for the activity by mapping their own stories first. By sharing their personal journeys, the facilitators across contexts modelled vulnerability and courage, creating a safe and supportive space for the participants to explore their own narratives. This activity proved to be one of the most impactful parts of the programme, allowing participants to express and process their experiences in a supportive setting.



# The Impact of the Participatory Training Programme

*Photo 9: F., 17 years old [Cauca, Colombia]*

Many of the children and youth who participated in the programme began with the belief that their stories did not matter, feeling isolated with no outlet to express themselves. In Nigeria, one participant said, “I think my life story and perspective does not matter to others... I just feel that way.” Similarly, in Mosul, another participant reflected, “No, I can’t [express myself], because there is no one who listens or understands me.” These feelings of invisibility - and not having a safe outlet to share their feelings and experiences - were recurring themes across all three contexts.

The programme provided young participants with an outlet and a platform to tell their stories. Through photography, they discovered new ways to express themselves and share their



experiences. In Iraq, one participant noted, “I have the courage to express myself and my feelings.” This empowerment was echoed in Colombia, where a participant reflected, “I think that sharing my life can be important for others because maybe they won’t make the same mistakes. Maybe I can inspire other people.”

As the programme progressed, participants became more engaged and confident in their abilities. In Nigeria, participants expressed excitement and pride in sharing their stories with the world, celebrating when they learned they could keep their cameras. In Iraq, participants described feeling empowered, safe, and excited to express their thoughts in ways that could make a difference in others' lives. Similarly, in Colombia, participants gained confidence in their photography skills. They reflected on how the techniques they learned would benefit them in capturing meaningful images that encapsulate their realities and speak to people from other countries.

This arc — from feeling invisible to becoming empowered storytellers — demonstrates the impact of the programme. The programme assessment demonstrates that participants gained creative and technical skills, grew in the belief that their stories mattered, and were empowered to share their experiences and perspectives. Comparing the pre- and post-programme surveys found that 95 per cent of participants reported a more positive perspective on their future, 91 per cent reported an improvement in their understanding for how to take photographs to share their perspectives, and 90 per cent felt more equipped to make a meaningful difference in their communities. These results highlight the programme’s success in instilling hope, imparting skills, and boosting self-confidence. As one participant in Nigeria noted after reflecting on their journey, “I believe [my story] should matter to others because my perspective might bring a solution, and my life story might be a lesson to others.”

## Lessons in Harnessing Photography and Participant-Led Storytelling for Emotional Healing

### **Photography as a Tool for Processing Difficult Experiences**

A key lesson from the programme is how photography can be a transformative tool for conflict-affected participants to process and express their difficult experiences. Unlike direct

conversations or traditional research methods, which could feel intrusive or overwhelming, photography allowed participants to determine what they shared and when and reflect on their emotions and memories in a less confrontational way.

In each context, participants were encouraged to capture moments that represented their highest and lowest points in life, allowing them to use photos as a non-verbal way to communicate their stories. In Iraq, for instance, participants represented their "lows" through images of destruction or people abandoning their homes—a stark reminder of the losses brought by war. Meanwhile, their "highs" were symbolized by photographs of schools, and people writing, or graduating, signifying hope and the pursuit of knowledge. A participant reflected, "I learned how to articulate my emotions, which I sometimes struggle with. This workshop taught me how to express my feelings effectively." In Colombia too, photography became a meaningful outlet for participants to express complex emotions like entrapment and isolation. One participant used the image of a "trapped yellow flower" to symbolize their feelings. Another participant depicted their "low" with a photograph of a rose separated from other flowers, reflecting feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Meanwhile, in Nigeria, participants represented their "highs" using images like birds in flight, symbolizing freedom after escaping captivity, or trees providing shade, reflecting the support they received from loved ones. As participants captured these images, they felt empowered by their ability to document their realities. As one participant in Nigeria remarked, "The fact that I came here, learned so many things, and even have the intention of teaching others is what makes me happy." Photography proved to be a medium that helped participants not only share and process their experiences but also build the skills and confidence to share their stories and inspire change.

### **Participant-Driven Framing of Conflict Discussions and Emotional Expression**

Another lesson learned from the programme was the value of participant-driven framing and pacing difficult discussions. This was particularly evident during activities like 100cameras' 'Map My Story' activity, where participants used photography to visually map their life journeys, allowing them to control how much or how little they wanted to share about their experiences. This gave them a sense of ownership over their stories and helped create an environment where difficult topics could be explored safely and at their own pace.



*Photo 10: Facilitator Photograph of participants at the training in Maiduguri*

During the activity, some participants became emotional, creating moments of vulnerability that shifted the group dynamic and encouraged others to open up. The programme allowed them to share their pain in a structured environment with outside facilitators who were seen as neutral and safe sounding boards. The creative outlet of photography helped them work through these emotions constructively, offering both relief and a sense of connection.

In Nigeria, for instance, while the boys eagerly shared their highs and lows, the girls found it more challenging. Starting with positive memories helped the girls open, though reflecting on their lows often brought tears. However, the process proved therapeutic, as they supported each other afterward with laughter, music, and dancing. One girl said, "I think I can say that I am very proud of myself today because I have learned a lot." Another boy shared, «Coming to Maiduguri, learning new things, taking part in this training... that makes me so happy." In Iraq too, photography facilitated deep emotional expression. While some boys hesitated to show vulnerability, one opened up and shared his experience of losing four uncles in the Mosul conflict, which in turn inspired others. The girls similarly opened up, with one bravely recounting the abandonment by her mother after her father's death. Another girl reflected on the empowering impact of the program, stating, "It has given me the courage to express myself and my feelings."

Despite concerns about re-traumatization, the programme provided a crucial outlet for participants to process their trauma. Few of the participants had ever had access to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). Many came from cultures or homes where it was not possible to discuss their experiences and emotions. For most participants, this programme

was the first safe space they have had to process what they have been through. Their reactions highlighted that even research and skills training programming when constructed in a participatory and careful manner, can play a role in fostering emotional healing and connection. Given the dearth of MHPSS resources in conflict-affected regions, this type of integrated approach could provide a way to scale up minimum levels of support for young conflict-affected people.

## Amplifying Voices: Messages of Peace to Decision Makers

### **Navigating Displacement and Insecurity**

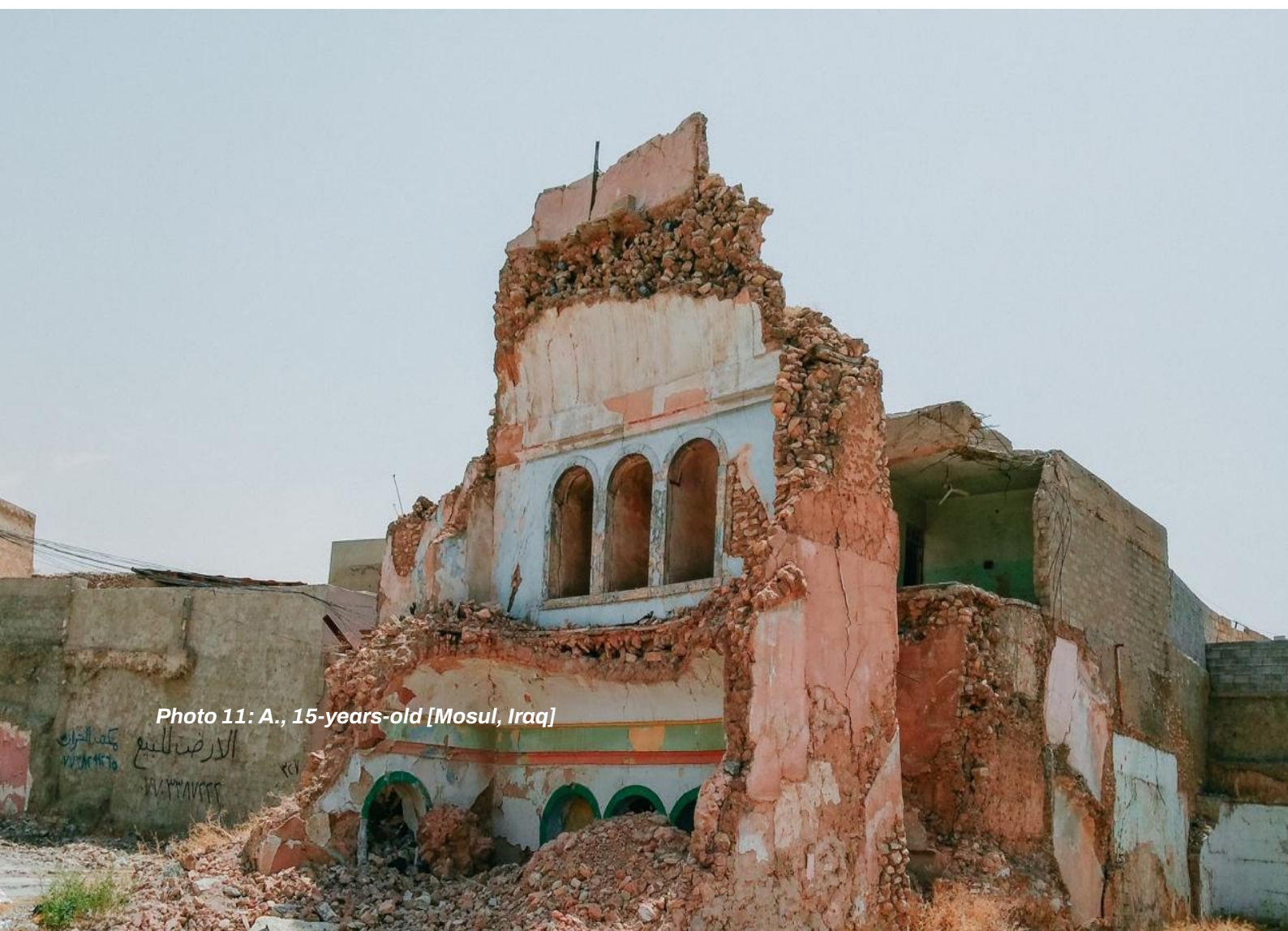
Participants spoke about the ongoing challenges of displacement and continued insecurity that deeply affect their daily lives post-armed group or post-conflict. Insecurity has forced many to leave their homes, leading to uncertainty about the future. In Nigeria, a participant expressed, "I am eager to find peace once again because the places we stay at the moment are not our homes. I would like peace to reign so we could go back to our homes," highlighting the emotional toll of displacement on their sense of belonging. Similarly, in Iraq, participants voiced concerns about the lasting impact of war on their generation, with one noting, "We left our families, relatives, house, and everything we love... even our city in order to survive."

The instability has disrupted education and employment opportunities, leaving many young people feeling uncertain about their prospects. Another participant viewed continued instability as undermining the mental health of Iraqis, sharing that "the experiences and horrors people went through during the war have deeply impacted their emotions..." In Colombia, participants voiced their concerns about the intersectional challenges of armed group presence, illegal coca production, and environmental challenges, such as water shortages and resource scarcity, warning that these problems could exacerbate displacement and lead to future conflicts. They emphasized how such challenges threaten their communities' stability, with one participant cautioning, "In about 20 years, we may face wars over natural resources if we don't act now." These reflections underscore the interconnectedness of displacement, insecurity, and the pressing need for solutions that address both immediate and underlying issues affecting young people across contexts.

### **A Collective Yearning for Peace**

The experiences of displacement and insecurity have fueled a collective yearning for peace among the participants. Across all contexts, participants expressed a deep desire for peace, security, and a return to normalcy. A boy from Nigeria articulated this longing, saying, "I think regularly of peace because I want all the violence to end, and I want to go back to living peacefully." Another emphasized the need for unity, stating, "Peace means coming together and working together." In Iraq, participants stressed that peace is not just an aspiration but a right, with one stating, "We need this peace to continue. It is essential and a human right." Meanwhile, a participant in Colombia noted the importance of dialogue, stating, "If we want peace, we must first listen to each other and find common ground."

These voices urge decision-makers to recognize that peace transcends the mere absence of conflict; it necessitates fostering environments where young people feel safe, valued, and heard. One participant expressed wanting "a world where everyone is full of happiness, where we all understand each other, where there are no more conflicts, and we love and help one another." Such reflections urge leaders to prioritize creating spaces that nurture understanding and collaboration, essential for building lasting peace in their communities.



*Photo 11: A., 15-years-old [Mosul, Iraq]*

## **Youth-Led Solutions for a Sustainable Future**

Across all contexts, participants articulated their hopes for a better future, sharing ideas for improving their countries, particularly around education, livelihoods, and peace with decision-makers. In Colombia, when asked what they would do if they were in leadership roles, participants emphasized the importance of psychological support for those affected by conflict. One participant said, "I would support them in seeking professional help from psychologists so they can process the situations they are facing." Another added, "Young people need to be heard, to have dialogues and that people talk to them; above all...they need to know they are not alone." In Iraq, participants proposed actionable solutions such as improving the education system and creating job opportunities for young people. One boy expressed that if he were in the position, he would "...provide education materials to youth after they have exited the war. Also, I would strive to make peace and foster security so there will be no problems again that may affect the youth." Similarly, a girl from Colombia shared, "Young people need more knowledge, training, and accompaniment from people who know more than us and can help." Most participants agreed, but some highlighted challenges in accessing this type of support. A girl from Iraq expressed deep anger and frustration at being denied schooling and reflected on how such experiences of exclusion created youth resentment. To ensure young people do not go down the same path as their parents or siblings, she urged those in power to ensure that youth can access education regardless of their relatives' purported ties to armed groups. In Colombia, the youth also stressed the importance of environmental education and sustainable practices, with one adding, "We need to teach how to recycle and care for the land." In addition to training and education, participants cited the need for other outlets for youth. Another girl proposed creating an art gallery in Mosul to host drawing workshops, offering youth a creative space to express their emotions and work through their experiences. These reflections highlight the need for platforms where young people can voice their concerns and ideas, enhance their skills and expand their opportunities, as they have clear aspirations for building a peaceful, sustainable future for themselves and their communities.

# Looking Ahead: Strengthening Future Participatory Programmes

The 2024 participatory photography and research programme described herein has laid a strong foundation for empowering youth through participation, self-expression, and advocacy. Looking ahead, there is immense potential to expand and refine this initiative to reach more young people and have an even greater impact. This section highlights some of the lessons learned and observations from the rollout of the programme that could help inform other participatory research and programming efforts with conflict-affected young people, or other populations.

Participatory approaches, as evidenced through this tripartite programme, have the potential to be powerful catalysts for change. However, these initiatives operate on a limited scale, restricting their transformative impact. To maximize their reach and ensure more young people are engaged meaningfully, scalable models that go beyond one-off interventions must be employed. One effective way to achieve this is through strategic partnerships with local organizations, schools, and community centers that already engage youth. By integrating participatory approaches into their existing frameworks, it is possible to create sustainable structures that allow for broader and continued outreach.

This programme has taken steps in this direction across all three contexts by establishing local partnerships and embedding the participatory model within existing programmes and initiatives. By collaborating with local organizations capable of sustaining some level of engagement, the aim was to ensure that young people could continue to benefit from follow-up activities even long after the initial programme concluded.

In addition to physical engagement, virtual platforms, such as WhatsApp groups or online forums, also offer a valuable option for maintaining ongoing dialogue and connection among participants. These platforms can break down geographical barriers, allowing young people from different regions to remain engaged and support one another long after the programme ends. Importantly, participants can control what they share on their profiles, ensuring they communicate and collaborate while protecting their identity if needed. Establishing an alumni network can further nurture a sense of belonging and shared purpose, empowering former participants to take ownership of their advocacy efforts. Regular virtual gatherings, creative

prompts, and continuous reflection will ensure that these young people stay connected, active, and engaged in their communities.

Photography, in particular, has proven to be an effective medium for easing into difficult discussions. Unlike traditional research or dialogue, photography offers participants a non-verbal way to process and express complex emotions. This approach creates a reflective space where deeper conversations can emerge organically and at a pace the participant chooses. Through images, young people can share their experiences, both painful and hopeful, in a way that invites empathy and understanding. This ability to navigate sensitive topics through photography not only empowers participants but also opens doors to broader societal conversations that might otherwise be challenging to initiate.

To ensure that these participatory programmes have a lasting and widespread impact, we must also focus on connecting these voices with national audiences, particularly in regions where state presence is minimal, such as rural Colombia. Beyond governments, connecting with well-resourced national civil society organizations, foundations, and education or reconciliation initiatives can help embed the programme's impact at a national level. Follow-up efforts should focus on better integrating these youth-led insights into national policy discussions, fostering deeper engagement with local stakeholders and amplifying the potential for long-term, systemic change.

By incorporating these strategies, the programme can expand its reach, create a deeper community impact, and foster a global network of young leaders committed to building a brighter future.





# Conclusion

*Photo 12: A., 19-years-old [Mosul, Iraq]*

In conclusion, this programme has left a lasting impact on participants by equipping them with practical skills, emotional resilience, and a renewed sense of purpose. As one participant reflected, “They have helped me to get to know myself, to become better as a person, to not give up and believe and trust in myself.” In Northeast Nigeria, a young girl who gained photography skills through the programme has since become the photographer for her family's wedding—demonstrating how MEAC equips participants with tools that serve both personal and communal empowerment. The programme's impact also goes beyond immediate skills; it has given these young people the tools and platforms to ensure that their voices remain central to future peacebuilding efforts.

The enduring resilience of these young people, brought to light through the program, captures their strength in the face of adversity. As one participant in Nigeria put it, "I am able to live and laugh and stay hopeful. I can say I am strong." Another, from Iraq, reflected, "After every obstacle, happiness will come. Sorrows do not last." Similarly, in Colombia, a participant reflected, “The highs and lows have helped me because, despite the problems that I have had,

they have become experiences to continue moving forward in life.” These young people, having faced tremendous challenges, are ready to move forward.

MEAC and its partners are committed to sustaining this engagement, closing the feedback loop, and creating lasting opportunities for these youth to be heard. Their voices, once silenced by conflict, now have the strength to shape a future defined by peace.

# MANAGING EXITS FROM ARMED CONFLICT



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