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LEARNING PAPER

Strengthening local capacities for social stability in Tripoli and Beqaa

A project by International Alert, Basmeh & Zeitooneh and House of Peace

About International Alert

International Alert works with people directly affected by conflict to build lasting peace. We focus on solving the root causes of conflict with people from across divides. From the grassroots to policy level, we bring people together to build sustainable peace.

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Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction and purpose

Within the context of Lebanon's compounded crises, the need to address social stability increases. Inter-community relations have been deteriorating especially in underprivileged areas and between Lebanese and Syrians.

With support from the "Regional Development and Protection Programme for Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq[1]", three organisations: International Alert, Basmeh and Zeitooneh, and House of Peace joined efforts working on a ten-month project (from March to December 2022) titled "Strengthening local capacities for social stability in Tripoli and Bekaa" (the Project thereafter) and operated in the mentioned regions along two objectives:

- Strengthening the capacities of active local organisations working on protection, education and livelihoods to integrate social stability into their work and pilot community initiatives.
- Strengthening capacities and supporting youth and women-led local committees and dialogue groups to implement initiatives in the community, which respond to locally identified needs and create opportunities for interaction and collaboration.

Each of the organisations worked on a community-based approach to social stability that fits best its expertise, network and resources. The Project was designed in such a way that focuses on the complementarity of the interventions and approaches among the partners. International Alert applied its peacebuilding approach through dialogue and building on previously established youth dialogue groups and lessons learnt to empower them within the community and expand their reach. Basmeh and Zeitooneh used nonformal education centers to reach different target groups joining in committees (parents, youth and women). House of Peace focused on conflict sensitivity capacity development to civil society organisations (CSOs). The three-partner collaboration translated into continuous coordination and building on each other's work to expand impact. Regular meetings were held to ensure synergies and aligned complementary approaches.

The project directly fed into the global goals of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development and bringing communities together to work on reducing inter- and intra-communal tensions.

Bringing together civil society organisations (CSOs) with different comparative advantages was very positive and unique, even though it requires more intense follow-up and effort to collaborate. CSOs' understanding of local context, their ability to identify opportunities to contribute to social stability and their ability to successfully implement a conflict-sensitive (CS) initiative has increased after receiving the conflict analysis trainings.

Training for dialogue group participants and CSOs members equipped them with skills to deal with tension and conflict through appropriate communication skills, understanding of local context, and identifying opportunities to contribute to social stability. The dialogue sessions helped alter the perspectives and challenge stereotypes of participating members as well as have a positive impact on the participants' immediate network (friends, family). The dialogue sessions and initiatives aimed to ensure inclusivity and diversity by including people with disability and other minorities.

The project contributed to establishing a network of CSOs in Bekaa and Tripoli, establishing new dialogue groups while concurrently empowering existing groups, and building existing youth and women committees' capacities in peace education. Positive impacts were observed at the level of the Dialogue groups and the local committees

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1   The "Regional Development and Protection Programme for Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq" is a multi-donor European initiative supporting Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq that aims to mitigate the impact of the forced displacement of Syrian refugees on host communities.

where it helped participants build new relationships and change attitudes and perceptions while concurrently strengthening community mechanisms. It also helped parents and children understand their concerns and aspiration, supporting them psychologically through the self-care and mental health support. Additionally, the community initiatives brought together people with different identities and demonstrated how they can work together and collectively benefit the community. Documenting evidence and reflections from implementation was an integral component of the project process whereby regular internal learning activities were conducted during the Project lifetime between the three partner organisations. In addition, a one-day round table took place on 16 December 2022, bringing in a wide range of actors in the social stability sector beyond the Project stakeholders, including international donors, UN agencies, international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), CSOs working in the social stability sector, as well as some of the Project's beneficiaries/participants. The aim is to connect the Project's learnings within a wider discussion of opportunities and challenges working on social stability in the current context, specifically along three approaches generally adopted in social stability programming: i) working with municipalities; ii) integrating conflict sensitivity within the humanitarian and development sector and; iii) working with youth and local groups on social stability in light of the crises.

This document gathered and analysed information from the Project learnings through its internal processes, final evaluation, and the round table discussion. It aims to offer actors in the social stability sector learnings from the ground to feed program/project planning. It is also worth noting that it adds to a process of accumulating internal learnings from previous International Alert projects. The document starts with general learnings on social stability interventions then moves to more specific findings and ends with recommendations.

2. General learnings for local social stability interventions

The Project's track record and most actors' experiences converged on common issues realised when implementing social stability interventions in Lebanon.

2.1 The economic crisis weighs on beneficiaries and overshadows interest in peacebuilding activities

The rapidly deteriorating livelihoods cannot be ignored. Employment, livelihood, and infrastructure are considered the priority concerns and a primary driver of instability. Compared to such needs, interest in tackling more socio-political and/or community conflicts fades. Therefore, basic service delivery is the entry point for social stability interventions. Projects to provide such services typically follow a faster pace and focus on quantitative deliverables, whereas peacebuilding is a long tedious process that focuses on building relationships. The tension between these two processes, if embraced and transformed, can improve overall programming and allow for synergy by converging the two approaches: offering services while building relations. This underlines the importance and relevance of using a conflict sensitivity lens when working on humanitarian and development projects.

2.2 Social stability interventions require persistence and long-term engagement

Projects aiming to enhance social stability rely on relationships, network building and creating trust (dealing with stereotypes and historical negative perceptions…etc.). Feedback from this Project, as well as other projects, points to the need for lengthy multiple-year engagement with communities for lasting results. One-off interventions have limited effectiveness, especially when dealing with a country witnessing multiple crises and regular conflicts.

The challenges that the communities and authorities face are intricate and date back to the unresolved repercussions of the civil war, the aftermaths of the post-war political settlement leaving marks on Syrian-Lebanese relations, regional turbulence and conflicts, especially the Syrian conflict, and more recently the economic meltdown and financial collapse. Such conditions create compound tension drivers and deepen conflict roots. The weight of structural and national-level conflicts beyond the community scope often disrupts local efforts. While aware that much of the conflicts have roots in national-level conflict dividers, the building of community resilience to political, sectarian and other antagonistic mobilisation remains a promising entry point but needs long-term engagement.

2.3 Building on successful past efforts increases the chances of success

The Project partners built on their network of local actors whom they had previously engaged with. It is a cumulative capacity-building process and facilitates trust, especially when a project's life is short. Continuing from, and complementing, previous initiatives' achievements increase impact and could contribute to forming geographic areas of community-level stability. A risk to continuing previous work with the same local partners might be the exclusion of new target beneficiaries, such as focusing along previous projects' lines on women and youth, versus addressing men's heads of households, for example.

2.4 Safe spaces target Syrian - Lebanese relations as well as other widening social divides

The competition for jobs and livelihood hardships; lack of trust in state institutions, the absence of rule of law; weakening municipal authority; the discriminatory social practices towards Syrians; social media hate speech and; the perceptions about Syrian refugees' aid bias all combine to create conflicts and put especially the Syrian refugees at greater risk and vulnerability. For example, the Head of a CSO in Bekaa noted that a few months ago, there was an initiative from a youth group in Arsal to close non-profit organisations and local organisations supporting Syrian refugees. The situation was only solved after interference from the legal authorities. The Head of this CSO also mentioned that, although there has been no major conflict in Arsal in the prior eight months, tensions remain very high and though 'you cannot see, you can feel them'.

Involving Syrian refugees in a dialogue is also not easy due to all the above reasons and because they lack legitimate representatives or because of resistance on the part of the community. The Project's created safe spaces allowed for breakthroughs. The space changes negative perceptions, even though they did not resolve the structural tension drivers.

Beyond nationality differences, local actors and Project participants mentioned that bridges were built between social classes and regions. Participants stressed that tension exists within the same nationality along different divides such as sects, origins, education and social background...etc.

Project participants and a wider group of local actors valued having these safe spaces permanently beyond the Project life cycle, be it physical spaces, such as the public park they designed in the Bekaa, or virtual spaces where they feel free to express themselves.

2.5 A line of tension exists between funding conditions and local needs

Local actors, CSOs and NGOs, find a discrepancy between acting to answer a community's challenges and adapting to a dynamic context and needs, while at the same time meeting funding requirements. The results of community need assessment and participatory approach to inform a project and program design might not fully reflect the donors' funding agenda. CSOs and NGOs compromise to secure funding for their operations and continuity. Even when funding adjusts to local changes, it takes time. A cited example to explain the issue is international funding primarily focused on Syrian refugees in Lebanon when the Lebanese living conditions dramatically deteriorated and created emergency needs. New program funding was expected to adjust, but the time lag creates some tension. Projects that forgo a participatory approach from needs assessment to the engagement of beneficiaries with the design risk missing on relevance and sustainability. Youth particularly emphasised this issue that hampers motivation and builds a sense of ownership.

2.6 Projects participants' financial assistance might be necessary during an economic crisis but could backfire

Daily livelihood conditions are increasingly hampering youth motivation to engage. Even the cost of transportation was considered a hurdle and consequently, any work beyond a project's life requires resources and funding for sustainability and could not rely only on self-motivation and volunteering. Providing assistance, especially cash assistance, to manage such a challenge could backfire weakening volunteerism and civic engagement. The fact that some NGOs adopted this system compelled others to follow and changed the dynamics of community engagement; thus the importance of vetting project beneficiaries and setting the right incentives to ensure a minimum level of self-driven commitment while resolving financial constraints.

3. Learnings specific to working with municipal councils, youth and CSOs

In addition to the above general learnings and in line with the Project approach and the round table discussion themes, the following findings focus on three working approaches: working with municipal councils and youth and working on community projects from a conflict sensitive perspective.

3.1 Municipal councils are under heavy strain but an opportunity presents itself to advance social stability mechanisms

Under the multiple crises' weight, municipal councils across the country are breaking down. Most have weak financial and human resources and skills; limited youth and women membership in councils and administrations; are constrained by local and national politics, and are resistant to change. They often lack information about the demographics and social conditions of their regions. They rarely give attention to Syrian refugees beyond security issues and prefer to serve their electorates or Lebanese residents. Municipal councils generally do not include youth and rarely work with them as change agents. Despite these challenges, municipalities remain a main actor and have to deliver a role way beyond their current capacities. While they deprioritise conflict sensitivity analysis and often focus on requesting from international donors and nongovernmental organisations support in basic or infrastructure-related services delivery due to their shortcomings, they play a catalyst role in social stability. They have official representation, legitimacy and authority and, consequently, are the formal institution that could launch and institute local engagement. At this critical juncture, they have the opportunity to build their capacities and integrate conflict sensitivity, especially that in some cases they can be tension drivers rather than connectors, such as through influencing the Syrian refugees - Lebanese relations. The Project participants noted that there is room for continued work with municipal councils, especially on conflict sensitivity and management training, if and when combined with basic service delivery; a function they are mandated to deliver but cannot.

3.2 Youth are catalysts of social stability and need long-term follow-up

Dialogue sessions for the youth were able to bring people together to break down barriers and create a safe space for sharing. Peer-to-peer, blended learning also proved powerful in empowering youth, allowing them to learn, practice and put their skills into action with a mentor. One young project participant said, "we were trained by International Alert, and we are looking forward to sharing our know-how with the new youth groups. We are transformers of the ideas that were transferred to us". Training the youth to become trainers is expected to have a multiplier effect, yet the impact is not yet sufficiently spread. A discussant explained: '… as youth taking training with many organisations, our mentality and perceptions are changing… unfortunately, this is not the case for all youth'.

However, youth empowerment and agency weaken when they feel alienated from the project inception and design. They expressed the importance of participating early on in assessing needs and formulating a project idea, in order to ensure its relevance. They wanted to take a project beyond its activities, and into their future. Youth motivation is thus threatened when they lack clarity on how to translate the acquired capacities to functioning that can make wider change happen after a project ends.

Participants in the Project confirmed the acquisition of interpersonal skills through different channels (online learning, peer-to-peer learning, staff training on conflict sensitivity…etc.) that allowed an individual transformation at work, with friends and family. During a wider discussion, opinions warned that trainings could lack a clear and sustainable horizon in the absence of a regular follow-up, as one participant in a round table stressed that "the skills need to be continuously invested" and this is not always clearly planned in a project. As a result, beneficiaries' motivation and commitment decline, especially youth.

3.3 Conflict sensitivity in community work is an ongoing process and not well spread or integrated

Participants of the community initiatives implemented as part of the project were trained on adopting a conflict-sensitive lens in planning and implementation. They planned inclusive, sustainable and conflict-sensitive initiatives based on the local community needs and context analysis. Conflict sensitivity analysis application remains nevertheless limited, not only across CSO but some NGOs, and international NGOs as well, despite its relevance to a context in crisis witnessing high vulnerability to tensions. The factors that a wider group of local actors attributed to the narrow spread included primarily: funding terms and conditions, the crises' repercussions on livelihoods, and lack of awareness and knowledge of the approach. Some local actors see community projects as 'too small' and national structural challenges surpass them. Conflict sensitivity of projects dealing with relations between Syrian refugees and Lebanese needs to be thought from the needs assessment stage, to project design and include all stakeholders in the decision, even though this takes time and might not succeed. It requires looking and building for trust between actors and the wider community; thus, a long process that benefits from working with CSOs already well known and positively perceived by the local community.

4. Recommendations for programming

4.1 Targeting long-term donor funding of social stability programs/ projects with flexible terms, especially in crisis countries

In a country facing structural and lasting challenges, longer-term engagement and a more relaxed timeline would be more conducive to building relationships of trust and are necessary to achieve tangible results. Funding needs to adapt to local needs to allow for community ownership. Donors should be willing to reconfigure project funding along the 'do not harm' approach as it advances and faces changing local realities. Funding every humanitarian, development and infrastructure should require integrating a conflict sensitivity lens, across all actors; from donors themselves to local actors (NGOs and CSOs).

4.2 Building local institutional partnerships and strengthening coordination for impact and sustainability

Notwithstanding the importance of building individuals' capacities in peacebuilding, lasting peacebuilding interventions that aim for a wider community spread should connect active actors and continue what has been done and learn from the previous work's achievements and failures. Expanding the circle of peacebuilding project ownership to include a variety of partners who invested and built relationships in the community and who would continue operation locally can contribute to the sustainability of efforts and impact.

Partnerships' effectiveness presupposes solid coordination between and amongst all community actors: municipalities, NGOs, CSOs and donors, starting early on with the interventions' conceptualisation, in order to avoid competition and replication. Such collaboration allows to tackle peacebuilding issues from different angles, increases motivation to engage, and broadens impact.

A suggestion by local actors along these lines has been to set up region-specific referral systems between CSOs working across sectors and on different services, beyond peacebuilding, to increase reach out to the community and raise awareness of conflict sensitivity through CSOs.

4.3 Improving the relationship between municipalities and youth

To enhance youth engagement in the civic sace and expand their role in the decision-making process and building of peace, engagement with municipalities could be done through the youth committees and/or by integrating youth into the municipal council's formal committees. Youth would test their peacebuilding capabilities in real life and practice their responsibilities as change catalysts. At the same time, this requires exhibiting to municipalities the value added of partnering with the youth and building on their potential. The aim is to integrate further youth into the local decision-making process at the municipal level, thus enhancing accountability and political agency.

4.4 Combining initiatives that build municipalities' conflict sensitivity capacities with the delivery of basic livelihood-related services

Municipal councils would be more involved in integrating a conflict sensitivity approach when they receive technical support with material aid that could have a visible impact on infrastructure and/or basic services for their constituency. This is natural because they are still evaluated and selected based on such success criteria and have difficulty in meeting them currently. Peacebuilding projects should be framed accordingly, like tackling environmental infrastructure issues using the conflict analysis lens. The convergence of a peacebuilding objective with a developmental objective, while giving the appropriate importance to the two connected processes would facilitate acceptance. Municipal councils should be the primary entry point from consultation to empowerment, support, and partnership. They need to get support in funding and securing funding from international organisations for their typical service delivery in connection with a social stability mechanism. In some cases, where municipality resources are very weak, peacebuilding work could be connected to essential municipal administration functions like building demographic, social, economic and environmental databases that inform development projects.

4.5 Communicating clearly a project's objectives at the beginning and application beyond its life

Working with youth on social stability is a high-success initiative and, as the Project demonstrated, leads to individual transformations. However, this requires effective communication to continuously show that the changes made can contribute and be applied in different aspects of life and community development. Participants need to see this trajectory early on from the beginning of the project, all the way beyond its life span and how to put in practice the results, especially if it is a short-term project.

Amidst current difficult livelihood conditions, and to fuel the youth's longer-term motivation it is suggested to hinge on the ability to keep an alignment between the youth's individual needs and their wider role as catalysts of peacebuilding. This could be done by connecting for example the youth volunteering with furthering their education or job search. Using the new generation's social media communication and influencing methods is another mechanism to maintain momentum and engagement. Such tools could also be used to connect youth in peace education across regions to exchange perspectives and experiences in their application of peacebuilding capacities in their respective communities.

4.6 Promoting established and successful mechanisms for replication

Community-formed mechanisms remain in need and could involve multiple local stakeholders. Participants noted that conflict mitigation mechanisms are only available in a few communities, even though sometimes influential people, religious leaders, the mayor, key stakeholders, and some well-respected family elderlies interfere to solve conflicts and tensions. These could be informal mechanisms that, when supported and promoted, develop. For example, a head of a CSO mentioned an established mechanism stating that there is a committee of volunteers in Al-Marj in the Bekaa to resolve conflicts established by sheikhs, mayors, influential people, and tribal elders.

4.7 Showcasing to the wider community the Syrian refugees - Lebanese youth groups' successful initiatives based on positive relations

Youth groups of different nationalities, religions, and classes that share trust and a positive team spirit would inspire the same for the rest of the community. If they can use peacebuilding training in initiating and implementing

projects that serve the community's basic needs in cooperation with the municipal councils, they can influence community perceptions, especially when such cooperation is exhibited and promoted. One approach to valorise and influence with such initiatives is participatory action research that creates agency while understanding the context intricacies and applying a conflict sensitivity lens, without missing out on the bigger macro setting.

4.8 Embedding a conflict sensitivity approach, not only in specific projects, but in all stakeholders and organisations' internal systems

The conflict-sensitive lens is not yet sufficiently accepted, understood and applied. Where it is introduced, it still needs to be followed up within monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure learning by doing and deeper integration in projects. It is still missing across many NGOs and even some international organisations; thus, it is not only about working with local initiatives but also whole organisations.

4.9 Applying the three-pronged approach in a peacebuilding project in a single geographic locality for synergistic results

Combining the work done with the municipal council, youth, and local CSOs within one specific and small municipality could enhance effectiveness and impact, as key actors would understand and be equipped with different tools to address conflicts in a geographically delineated area.

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