

Evaluation summary

Reducing young Syrians' vulnerability to recruitment through Peace education project, Syria, Turkey and Lebanon – Internal evaluation

March 2016

Evaluation theme

1. Countering violent extremism
2. Crime, violence and instability
3. Psychosocial support
4. Reconciliation and transitional justice
5. Refugees and displacement

Introduction

This summary outlines the findings of an internal evaluation of the project Reducing young Syrians' vulnerability to recruitment through Peace education project in Syria, Turkey and Lebanon. The project, implemented by International Alert and four local partners, aimed to test the effectiveness of different youth programming methodologies at promoting young Syrians' resilience to violence, in particular resilience to joining violent extremist groups, and to further understanding amongst practitioners.

The project was active between October 2015 and March 2016 and the evaluation took place in March 2016. The aim of the evaluation was to assess the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of project implementation, and identify achievements against expected results and objectives. The evaluation showed that the provision of psychosocial support, safe spaces, supportive and positive models, and value-based lessons in non-violence, human rights and self-care helps young people to navigate and cope with the impact of war.

Background to the project

The project, funded by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), reached 7,711 young Syrians, provided training to 160 educators and supported 87 youth leaders. The project engaged children aged 6–18 and youth aged 18+ in a range of peace education, psychosocial and youth engagement interventions in 32 locations across Syria, Turkey and Lebanon.

Radicalisation of Syrian children represents a growing challenge to peace in the Syria conflict context, and young people are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation by armed

groups. In response, the overall objective of the project was to increase understanding of what makes young Syrians vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, and to test what interventions might promote resilience and reduce that vulnerability.

The specific objectives of this project were:

1. To improve understanding amongst practitioners and the donor community of the risk/vulnerability and push/pull factors for young Syrians (of different age groups in different locations) and the resources, networks and factors, which can help reduce recruitment risk.
2. To increase knowledge and skills of children and youth on peace, tolerance, life-skills and other peace education topics as well as demonstrable changes in attitudes towards a 'pro-peace' approach.

The project was implemented based on the theory of change (TOC) that peace education can, in diverse ways, contribute to reducing the vulnerability of Syrian children and young people to recruitment by violent extremist groups.

Alert's local implementing partners adopted five different approaches to youth programming:

- creative and interactive arts-based psycho-social educational approach.
- faith-based resilience and interfaith dialogue.
- 'life street' with vulnerable street children.
- 'building bridges' between networks of young people.
- mainstreaming peace into formal education curriculum.

Methodology

The evaluation process consisted of a comprehensive desk review of project documentation and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data providing a background on the operating contexts, followed by a field visit to the main project locations. In March 2016, seven teams of field researchers visited 10 of the 32 locations, selected to ensure diversity in contexts and representation of different and varied approaches and methodology. During the field visit, quantitative data was collected through questionnaires completed by 5,504 children, and qualitative data drawn from key informant interviews, focus group discussion and reflective interviews with implementing partners.

Summary of findings

The evaluation has shown that peace education can play an important role in reducing vulnerability to recruitment by violent extremist groups and increasing resilience to engaging in violence. Peace education achieves this by:

- providing supportive social networks through the creation of physical and emotional safe spaces for children and young people with trusted mentors.
- promoting psychosocial resilience and wellbeing.
- building bridges across divides and fostering intercultural understanding and respect for diversity.

- providing alternatives to violence and delegitimising violence.
- offering alternative non-violent avenues for community activism and engagement.
- protecting the most vulnerable children that formal education cannot reach.

Most of the project's output indicators were largely achieved, such as the number of children and youth targeted, the number of youth leaders supported, or the number of educators trained. The increase in knowledge and skills of participants on peace education was only partially achieved due to the short project timespan. However, as a result of the project there are several examples of change in attitudes towards a pro-peace approach.

The research identified the following vulnerability factors (VF):

- VF1. Degradation of education infrastructure and opportunities to learn.
- VF2. Lack of economic opportunity.
- VF3. Disruptive social context and experiences of violence.
- VF4. Displacement, trauma and loss.
- VF5. Deprivation of personal psychological needs for efficacy, autonomy and purpose.

The research outlined the following resilience factors (RF):

- RF1. Alternative and respected sources of livelihood.
- RF2. Access to comprehensive, holistic and quality education.
- RF3. Access to supportive, positive and inclusive social networks and institutions.
- RF4. Alternative avenues for exercising agency and non-violent activism.

Project impact

Despite the short-term implementation period, the project has demonstrated evidence of youth programming building children and young people's resilience to violence. The overall impact of the programmes has been significant, with several participants reporting they have been prevented from joining violent extremist groups as a result of their involvement in the project.

To some extent, the intervention programmes demonstrated impact against each of the identified vulnerability factors. The most addressed factors were the deprivation of personal psychological needs (VF5), and the degradation of the education infrastructure (VF1). Displacement, trauma and loss (VF4), as well as disruptive social context and experiences of violence (VF3), were also frequently addressed factors. The least addressed factor was lack of economic opportunity (VF2).

Project relevance

Alert's research and experience from the youth interventions found that vulnerability among young Syrians stems from a failure to meet basic human needs. In many cases, violent extremist groups are effectively meeting these needs. The most vulnerable groups are males aged 12–24, children and young adults not in education, internally displaced persons and

refugees without supportive family structures and network. The risk of recruitment is greater within Syria and in the refugee camps.

Programmes in Syria therefore have the greatest potential to influence recruitment drivers; however, young Syrians in Lebanon and Turkey are still at risk, thus programmes in those three countries are still needed and relevant.

Lessons

Although the project has demonstrated that peace education builds resilience and can reduce vulnerability to recruitment, there are challenges to delivering effective peace education in conflict contexts. The evaluation has identified the following lessons, opportunities and challenges:

- Peace education is effective but needs to be consistently supported over the longer term.
- Peace education approaches were particularly effective and demonstrated potential for longer-term impact in three key areas: providing supportive networks, safe spaces, trusted mentors and positive role models for young children; addressing the impact of psychological trauma and building psychological resilience; and building bridges across divides and fostering intercultural understanding and respect for diversity.
- Peace education is likely to be more effective if applied as part of an integrated approach to building resilience and reducing vulnerability.
- Peace education relevance and effectiveness is significantly influenced by local context and locally tailored approaches work best.
- Peace education is most effective for children aged 10–15 and should be adapted to the needs of younger children.
- Peace education should be combined with additional support, as required, for children and young people with acute and special needs.
- Peace education is also relevant for adults.
- Finding safe spaces to conduct activities in live conflict conditions can be very challenging, especially during air strikes.

Recommendations

Long-term planning: Programme cycles lasting for at least two years maximise impact and reduce the potential negative consequences of providing short-term psychosocial support without follow-up. A longer programme cycle would also facilitate the assessment of impact.

Targeted approach: Current project methodologies should be tailored according to needs. As peace education approaches have been proven more effective on children aged 10-15, future programming should develop strategies to attract and retain participation of both young children (aged 6-10), and young people aged 16+.

Comprehensive package of support: Peace education programmes should be planned and delivered as part of a comprehensive package of support, which addresses other factors of vulnerability for young people, such as economic factors. Youth programming should also address young people's livelihood needs by providing vocational training for teenagers and adults, and the means to start-up businesses.

Gender dimension: Peace education should be further refined to consider how to address the gender dimensions of vulnerability for children and young people, such as the specific differences for risk for young girls and boys of different ages.

Robust referral mechanisms: Robust referral mechanisms should be established for at-risk children and children with special needs, so that these needs, where they cannot be met by peace education and the kind of psychosocial support offered within this project, can be addressed by other specialist organisations.

Complementary adult peace education: Complementary adult peace education programming should be developed in response to the interest and need expressed by parents to participate in peace education programmes. This would buy buy-in amongst parents and the community, and encourage the sustainability of change beyond individual children, creating a positive, enabling environment for children and young people, and exposing parents and family members to peace education content.