

## Peace education and psychosocial support for social cohesion

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**Evidence from psychosocial support-based peace education work with young displaced Syrians shows that addressing trauma is critical in overcoming psychological barriers to social cohesion.**

Conflict has extensive psychological impacts on children and young people, and anxiety among young refugees is widespread.

Refugees may suffer from various emotional, cognitive, physical, behavioural and social problems, as well as from the impacts of negative coping mechanisms. Withdrawal as a form of psychological safeguarding is regularly reported, while the traumatic experiences of war are further exacerbated by the “daily stressors of displacement, poverty, lack of resources and services to meet basic needs, risks of violence and exploitation, discrimination and social isolation”.<sup>1</sup> Many young Syrians have little hope for the future, and feel themselves to be in a state of limbo between a Syria they cannot return to and a host country where they cannot integrate.

In protracted conflicts, the social networks and social systems which provide support and regulate well-being often disintegrate; the resulting lack of family and community cohesion, shared identity or supportive relationships can lead to mental health issues and stress disorders, particularly in children and young people. Although there is widespread recognition that humanitarian responses should include mental health and psychosocial support services, the role of trauma in social cohesion processes is often overlooked. As a result, programmes do not consistently address the psychological needs that have an impact on how people relate to each other.

Up to now, the major focus of such programming has been on addressing tensions between communities over jobs and services, or on establishing mechanisms for interaction, without much thought given to addressing the trauma that limits chances for social cohesion in the first place.

This often limits programme effectiveness. For example, practitioners working with refugees in Tripoli in Lebanon have experienced challenges in implementing cash-for-work, vocational training and social entrepreneurship programmes with young Syrians and Lebanese because of heightened tensions related to sporadic clashes between communities in Tripoli, and recurrent interpersonal and social issues – including social and workplace tensions, bullying, stress and anxiety – that lead to participants dropping out of the programme or unable to hold down steady work.<sup>2</sup>

### Providing the tools

Trauma-sensitive approaches, however, can have a positive impact on social cohesion between refugees. Peace education projects led by International Alert’s local partners in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey involved training educators and support workers to deliver regular sessions in schools and community centres to promote peaceful interaction, and to provide outreach, mentoring and referral services for children and young people.<sup>3</sup> Although the projects were adapted to the specific needs of local contexts, they all aimed to address barriers to social cohesion and restore social networks by building respect for diversity, promoting agency and providing avenues for action which benefited the wider community.<sup>4</sup> Primarily, the partner agencies created safe spaces to allow children to develop a sense of physical and psychological safety and supported young people to deal with traumatic memories.

The approaches were assessed before and after the intervention through Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice (KAP) surveys, in addition to qualitative interviews and

focus group discussions. The survey data consistently demonstrated that children and young people had increased their knowledge and skills in peace, tolerance and other life-skills areas, across the different locations and approaches. The most significant improvements attributable to the programme were in understanding how tensions can be eased by dialogue and listening to others, in self-expression and discussing problems, and in openness to diversity – all attitudes which are conducive to social cohesion.

Young people were being equipped with the tools to manage and express their anger in a non-violent way, and facilitators observed reduced bullying and increased cooperation and play, including between girls and boys. In the words of one facilitator: “We give them tools to express themselves in the community rather than using weapons to express anger at their losses.” Interviews and focus group discussions with parents and communities corroborated the data, with participants stating that the desire for revenge and aggressive behaviour that many young people had exhibited before the start of the programme had decreased. Although it is important to monitor these changes over the longer term in order to assess long-term impact, these initial results show that programmes focusing on addressing social cohesion between refugees through psychosocial support can have a positive impact.

### Limitations

There are four main factors that influence – and may limit – the potential of these psychosocial support-based approaches to have a lasting impact. Firstly, the need for longer-term social cohesion or peacebuilding approaches can be eclipsed by emergency humanitarian and psychosocial needs. Secondly, there are very real physical barriers to interaction between host and refugee communities – for example, roadblocks or separate schooling – that reduce opportunities for social cohesion. Thirdly, the impact of psychological-based approaches will be limited where there is a lack of complementary support to enable access to education, employment, health, cultural and other services. Finally, the lack

of qualified staff and high staff turnover rates due to short-term funding and gaps between projects compound these problems.

Receptiveness of the host community also has significant influence on social cohesion. It can be challenging to engage the host population in mixed group activities, especially where there is little trust and high levels of fear. For example, practitioners in Lebanon have consistently found it challenging to engage host communities in joint psychosocial support activities with refugees due to the stigma and mistrust between communities. In order to overcome this, psychosocial interventions need to be part of a holistic, tailored package of support which benefits both refugee and host communities. This could include interventions that bring children and young people from the host community to shared safe spaces and engage them in activities that challenge existing stereotypes and build trust.

### Conclusion

Psychosocial support-based peace education approaches can help individuals to heal, regain a sense of self and positive identity, and lay the foundations for building supportive social networks across communities, which are all integral to building social cohesion. Without consistently addressing trauma, social cohesion programmes are likely to have limited sustainability and potentially risk doing harm. Rather than being seen as a separate albeit complementary programming focus, addressing the impact of trauma should be a building block for all social cohesion efforts when working with communities affected by conflict and displacement.

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1. UNHCR (2015) *Culture, Context and the Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing of Syrians A Review for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Staff Working with Syrians Affected by Armed Conflict* [www.unhcr.org/55f6b90f9.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/55f6b90f9.pdf)

2. Skype interview with Syrian psychologist, March 2017

3. Working with 7,000 young Syrians aged 6-18 and youth aged 18+ inside Syria and living as refugees in Lebanon and Turkey.

4. For more information, and a full evaluation, see International Alert (2016) *Teaching peace, building resilience: Assessing the impact of peace education for young Syrians* <http://bit.ly/IA-2016-peace>