

Supporting Local Infrastructures for Peace Post COVID-19: The Role of an Integrated Peacebuilding-Development Approach in the Middle East and North Africa

Expert-level Dialogue

14th December 2020

Summary Note

This note presents the summary of the online dialogue with peacebuilding experts in the Middle East and North Africa, holding a view to identifying policy gaps on peacebuilding that need to be addressed in the region. This ensures that infrastructures for peace in the region can deliver peacebuilding responses early and supporting and advancing development gains. Additionally, there was a collation of actionable recommendations for more consolidated action to support local infrastructures for peace at regional, national and local levels in the region.

Participants included peacebuilding experts from countries in the Middle East and North Africa region. Recommendations from this dialogue will be incorporated into a final policy document on strengthening infrastructures for peace post-COVID-19. The overall finding of this dialogue was that the development of peace infrastructures at all levels has great potential to build cultures of peace on the continent.

1. Context

The trajectory of conflict in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) does not respect political or territorial boundaries, as most security challenges are cross-border in nature. Even the slightest increase in violence and humanitarian instability exerts pressure on and leads to further insecurity in the entire region. Therefore, building strong national and regional capacities to implement peacebuilding and sustaining peace (i.e., leadership, accountability, capacity) and pursuing coherent and coordinated peacebuilding approaches (i.e., operational and policy coherence) are of utmost importance in the region.

Some of the drivers of ongoing conflicts in the MENA region include the absence of appropriate regional consensus and commitment to prevention, foreign interventions, ongoing militarisation of societies, reprisals against peacebuilders and activists, social prejudice, inequalities and stereotypes, as well as the absence of human security and accountability for the implementation of international legal principles. The COVID-19



pandemic does accelerate challenges in the region.¹ The impact of COVID-19 has worsened protracted conflict situations, exposing under-investment in health and social protections in the region and over-investment in the defence sector.² The billions of dollars spent on arms purchases could be invested in the strengthening of peace infrastructures for the realization of economic and social rights and promoting peace and people's resilience to the socio-economic, justice and health repercussions of the pandemic.

The work of local peacebuilders in the MENA region focuses on building community capacities for peacebuilding and conflict prevention, advocating for the establishment of Early Warning Early Response (EWER) systems, and building resilience by creating platforms for horizontal and vertical information exchange, learning, joint analysis and action. Their work does not traditionally fall under a specific international agenda or framework (i.e., sustaining peace, development, women, peace and security) but instead remains crosscutting and cross-sectoral in practice.

However, their actions are not enough. Breaking the cycle of violence can be achieved only if policymakers rebuild institutions and frameworks in a way that rejects the dynamics responsible for the conflict, and instead focus on uplifting the key drivers and enablers of sustainable peace. The traditional peacebuilding approach—applied after the clear ending of a conflict and focused primarily on a clear and stable central government as the key counterpart in peacebuilding—cannot ensure sustainable peace in today's MENA region. Complementing traditional approaches with local and community-based solutions will enhance the likelihood of achieving peace in the long term. While traditional approaches may lead to a temporary stabilization, it does not address fully and effectively the conflict's dynamics, root causes, and consequences, which is crucial to engage with in efforts to sustain peace.³

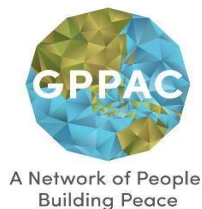
2. Infrastructures for peace in MENA Region: Lessons and Challenges

The “Arab Spring” (a series of people's protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010) unleashed a wave of social transformation that peace activists could only dream before. The fact that the revolutions were pursued in the spirit of non-violence shows that those concepts and practices are becoming mainstream and are changing the political culture. The courageous, peaceful movement of people is a tremendous victory for the peace movement in the Arab world.

¹ GPPAC. 2020. *No Sustainable Peace Without Us: Local Perspectives on Peacebuilding in the Middle East and North Africa*. <<https://gppac.net/resources/no-sustainable-peace-without-us-local-perspectives-peacebuilding-middle-east-and-north>>

² Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). 2020. “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019”. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/trends-international-arms-transfers-2019>

³ World Bank Group. 2020. *Building for Peace: Reconstruction for Security, Equity and Sustainable Peace in MENA*. Washington DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/ World Bank, 3



Participants discussed the impediments that prevent infrastructures for peace from being consolidated to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies:

Failed Social Protections: Over the past decade, the poor economic and political conditions that sparked the Arab Spring have not only continued, but also worsened, driving the recent return of large-scale protests across the MENA region. There is growing evidence, for example, suggesting that the poverty in non-oil exporting countries has risen significantly in the past decade. The heightened economic vulnerability of the middle class—due to failing social protection systems and emphasis on selective and targeted subsidies—together with rising income inequality and limited intergenerational mobility, is contributing to the spread of political discontent and even militancy. Access to information has become more limited and the space for civil society severely compressed, as national security imperatives have made a strong comeback.

Human Rights Violations: Human rights are intimately linked to the dynamics of peace and conflict. The systematic denial of human rights, in addition to continued poor performance of institutions, increases risks of political instability and widespread violence. In situations of actual gross violations of human rights, torture and denial of basic rights, it is difficult to understand the value of peacebuilding and development and the role of peacebuilding organizations.

Deficient Restorative and Transitional Justice Mechanisms: Participants were unanimous on the fact that the MENA region is in urgent need of transitional justice mechanisms for social healing and rebuilding trust. Having these systems in place prepares the ground for a more peaceful and democratic future. Arab societies are clearly facing a period of transition where many questions regarding the abuses of the old regimes are emerging and where the traditional justice mechanisms are not delivering the opportunities to rebuild trust.

Persistence of Human Insecurity: The MENA region is largely undergoing structural economic crisis of sporadic growth, high unemployment and the persistence of poverty, which all contribute to human insecurity. The region is also facing mounting challenges when it comes to food security and climate change. Climate change, particularly increased desertification and general scarcity of resources. Scarcity has the potential for negatively affecting millions in the future. The persistence of low human, economic and social indicators and the shrinking of the middle class have important consequences for the region. Persistence of poverty, lack of development and environmental pressures can all contribute to political and social crises that threaten long-term social and political stability.

Militarization of local communities: Participants noted that the level of militarization in the region brings social problems such as child soldiers and violence against women, in addition to the destruction of infrastructure, educational systems and the creation of long-term sectarian and inter-communal hatred.



Absence of a Coherent Peacebuilding Approach: Peacebuilding approach is rarely seen relevant in the context of conflicts and refugee flows that characterize the situation in the region. It results in the lack of communication between isolated (yet, related) peacebuilding initiatives and duplicated work, with limited space for learning and exchange. There is also a need for analysis of local peacebuilding practice within the larger contexts of international relations, international development and aid.

Lack of Evidence-Based Research and Institutions that advance Peacebuilding: The MENA region is urgently in need of critical thinking in the field of conflict resolution and strong academic programs and research institutes, which can consolidate the knowledge of peace practitioners and help create a knowledge base of research, best practices, and training materials. The region is still a consumer of knowledge or research work done externally. Homegrown research institutes are essential to building sustainable movements that can evolve through shared lessons and debate. Some universities, in collaboration with civil society organizations, have implemented conflict resolution trainings; however, these sporadic events have not been complemented by sustained academic attention.

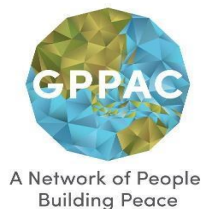
Persistent Inequalities: In the MENA region, individuals face a range of intersecting and compounding inequalities, including those tied to income, wealth, education, gender, employment, and healthcare. Perpetuated over generations, these types of inequality inhibit social mobility, thereby adversely impacting society, the economy, and the long-term prospects for regional stability

3. Local Infrastructures for peace in MENA Region: Impact of COVID-19

The Arab region can seize the opportunities of COVID-19 response and recovery to make progress on the drivers of conflict and enabling factors for development and sustainable peace. As notions of 'security' are expanded to include health security, new avenues emerge for regional collaboration. Some countries of the region have already stepped up humanitarian efforts to provide medical aid to other countries in the region to curb the spread of COVID-19. Others are gearing up to do the same and to extend their support beyond the medical emergency phase. More regional cooperation would assist in tackling the many transboundary sources of fragility that plague the Arab region. With COVID-19 lockdowns and many people interacting primarily online, political, cultural, religious and community leaders, as well as social media platforms and regional media outlets, should use this opportunity to seek opportunities to advance a culture of tolerance, mutual respect and peaceful co-existence.

4. Key priorities for action

Peacebuilding activities in the MENA region should reflect on the history and focus on the future. Major areas that should be prioritized in promoting peacebuilding activities include:



- Horizontal and vertical relationship building, including at the regional level, is an example of infrastructures for peace in action. The relationships comprise social capital, social solidarity and social cohesion. With this, a predictability dimension will be included in peacebuilding processes, because when people have the assurance that there are relationships to fall back on in times of conflict, they become more resilient. For example, there should be more regional coalitions like the current MENA Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security.
- Measuring the impact of peacebuilding activities is fundamental. This will support future programming, policies and strategies on subsequent peacebuilding activities. For instance, documentation and analyses of lessons learned within 5-10 years, can be used to project the efficacy (or otherwise) of future peacebuilding activities. This will further guide how infrastructures of peace should be structured and how to activate them.

5. Next steps and recommendations:

The following recommendations were proffered by the participants on how to sustain peacebuilding in the region post COVID-19:

- ***Launching a New Governance Reform Agenda at the national and regional levels:***
 - In the past, governments have adopted reforms most eagerly in response to severe economic downturns and political crises. Most of these reforms were technocratic in nature, although a few supported greater transparency and social accountability. Some of these reforms have been quite successful, others have failed. The lessons of past efforts provide an important foundation for launching a new governance reform agenda for the coming decade; MENA policymakers must understand that such an agenda is an essential part of any solution to the region's growing and complex development challenges.
 - A new reform agenda could ensure that young women and young men, as well as other under-represented groups, have the space and means to participate in public life. This could include the adoption of gender-sensitive national youth policies and the establishment of formal youth parliaments and councils to build channels between policy makers and local communities.
- ***Taking an active step to ensure meaningful participation of local peacebuilders, including women and youth, in all actions pertaining to the implementation of the peacebuilding-development nexus:***
 - This includes breaking the stereotypes and championing the fact that women and youth are an enabling factor for dialogue and peacebuilding. It is long overdue for women and youth in MENA countries to be fully considered and involved in reconciliation processes.



- While the past decade has seen mass atrocities and unprecedented levels of repression and silencing of opinions in the MENA region, local peacebuilders and ordinary citizens remain key forces of resistance and change. For example, civil society actors' persistent documentation of decades of violations ensures the preservation of history and memory. Legal and social mobilization, including criminal accountability efforts and street protests, maintain attention to the commitments to the principles of international and national law.
- Moreover, there is a crisis of expertise in the international policymaking field, namely a reliance on quick analysis by “experts” far removed from sites of conflict, rather than meaningful engagement with local peacebuilders embedded in those sites, whose experiences can and should inform policymaking. There must be a genuine effort on the part of policymakers in general, and policy advisors to ensure that such informed expertise plays a leading role in shaping policy in the MENA region.
- ***Addressing the Drivers of Inequality for Long-Term Regional Stability:***
 - This should involve integrated efforts to increase access to quality education and healthcare, promote inclusive growth, support the private sector as an engine of job creation, and improve governance and accountability. Doing so would go a long way toward promoting healthy societies, strong economies, and long-term stability in the region.
- ***Promoting Principles of Human Security instead of National Security:***
 - Support is required to raise the capacity of youth in the region on disarmament. GPPAC in the MENA region works to limit armament and militarization to stop the illicit trade of weapons and arms, connecting the militarization to gendered root causes of violence. Such initiatives should be leveraged.
 - The change in social stereotypes could be achieved through the development of gender-sensitive school programmes on elimination of gender stereotypes and gender based violence. Governments have to ensure that children receive proper education based on respect for diversity and differences, such as peace education programmes. Jordan is a good example of a country that has begun to incorporate gender studies into their curricula.
- ***Addressing the Challenges of Health, Food and Economic Security:***
 - The pandemic offers the opportunity to foster cooperation and set a roadmap of channels to strengthen both the health and food sector throughout the region. With food security, potential solutions include providing resources to maximize production or investing in uncultivated lands. Through resource analysis and assessment, a regional plan can be established to guide regional cooperation. The political differences



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notwithstanding, discussions towards relief and development to preserve food and health security could open channels for partnership building.

- It is imperative to incorporate a focus on economic empowerment in guiding local, national and regional actions as it opens the possibility for political participation from young people and further fosters avenues for peacebuilding. Young people should be invested in as productive agents.

- ***Developing Early Warning and Early Response Mechanisms:***
 - The absence of an early warning and early response mechanism remains a challenge in the MENA region. It is important to collect information at the local level based on early warning indicators and engage with decision-makers who can identify the relevant actors or institutions to respond and mobilize the necessary capacity and resources.
 - Local peacebuilding actors could lead the data collection due to their comparative advantage in accessing information within communities. Civil society's experience in advocacy can also facilitate the preparation of implementable recommendations for policy response. Furthermore, MENA early warning and response mechanisms informed by local knowledge would ensure political independence that international actors would not have.