



Lebanon

Pilot Project: Growing an Interreligious Youth Network for Peace and Children's Rights in the Most Deprived Region of Lebanon

In Lebanon, many children grow up cut off from other communities. Prejudices, stereotypes, and hate among religious groups are widespread. A UNICEF study from August 2022 underscores the impact of this crisis on children and youth: their right to health, welfare, security, and education as well as their right to play is heavily limited. The goal of the GIZ's pilot projects in Lebanon was thus to build a multi-religious youth network that through children's rights education strengthens social cohesion and interreligious understanding. Young people would be effective "agents of change," who overcome religious differences and actively engage in the betterment of life quality for children and youth.

Results

A multireligious (youth) network played an important role in enhancing social cohesion and overcoming religious conflicts. The network, set up in cooperation with stakeholders from various religious communities, focused on children's rights. Children and youth were specifically targeted for inclusion and it was ensured that their interests were represented.

The network included 76 young people from different religious communities, of whom 47 were young women, who were trained to become youth leaders. They received an education in children's rights and organising youth groups. The trainings played an important role in establishing a common identity, preparing them for dialogue sessions and other group activities.

Duration:	02/2022 – 12/2022
Implementation:	GIZ Project "Promoting Peaceful Coexistence in Host Communities in Lebanon" (PCL)
Partners:	Relief and Reconciliation for Syria (NRO) along with religious authorities from the Akkar District (Sunni Mufti, Greek Orthodox Archbishop, Maronite Archbishop, Alawi Sheikh)

Among the events they took part in were dialogue sessions with the most important religious leaders in the Akkar District. A joint breaking of the Ramadan fast marked the start of the interfaith dialogue. Individual meetings took place afterward with the Sunni Mufti of Akkar, the Maronite Archbishop, the Greek Orthodox Archbishop as well as the Alawi Sheikh. In addition to the youth leaders, around 70 children and youth from different communities took part in the dialogue with the religious leaders, with questions about religion and children's rights.

The network members also worked together to develop a children's rights charter based on a survey of 632 children conducted by the youth leaders. The charter demands, among other things, better quality of life for children and youth in Akkar and Lebanon. The youth leaders presented the charter to the religious leaders at a joint meeting and they officially accepted it. A graphic display of the charter

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The Problem

Many children and youth grow up completely isolated from other religious groups. They reproduce stereotypes and religious hatred without ever having critically questioned the predominant beliefs in their respective communities.

The Role of Religious Actors

Religious authorities are often seen as role models for their congregants when it comes to their behaviour. When interreligious encounters between religious dignitaries can take place on even ground, the communities can be prompted to rethink.

should ensure that younger children and those who have trouble reading can also understand it.

Leisure activities for children and young people from all religious communities were also an integral part of the network. Regular music, theatre, and sports classes were a highlight for at least 450 children (228 of whom were girls) who otherwise would have no access to free-time activities. The music classes led to a children's choir which performed at the closing conference. An interreligious summer camp was held, with 302 children and youth, of whom 163 were girls, taking part. With no nationalist or confessional boundaries separating the children, they sang, played, and made new friends. One 12-year-old boy who belonged to the Alawi community said, "I don't have any friends from other religions in my village, because all of the residents are Alawites. But here (at camp), I have found friends from other religions, Muslim and Christian alike."

Challenges and Learnings

The success of this project hinged on the close cooperation with partner organisations from civil society. The partnership provided access to the different communities and established trust, especially in the sensitive areas of interreligious activities. Working with religious actors, however, proved to be a bit of a challenge at times, as many of them were taking part in international cooperation for the first time. The difficult political and economic situation in Lebanon required a continual adaptation of the project, for reasons such as increasing transport costs.

The pilot project delivered valuable insights for future GIZ initiatives, especially in regards to interreligious dialogues and advancing children's rights. The youth network remains established with partners from civil society and can serve as a model for other regions in Lebanon. Religious authorities are influential actors who should be incorporated into further projects aimed at strengthening social cohesion in Lebanon.

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