4 lessons on youth and peace building in Lebanon

Young people stage a protest in front of the Lebanese parliament in Beirut. Photo by: Mhamad Kleit / CC BY-NC-SA

"Girl bomber kills 5 in northeastern Nigerian market," "From a private school in Cairo to ISIS killing fields in Syria" — these are just a couple of recent headlines highlighting how youth are mobilized for violent causes today. But the news isn't all bad. In conflict zones around the world, young people are also working together to make positive change.

Almost half of the world's population is under the age of 25, making this generation a key player in conflict resolution. This demographic reality holds true in Lebanon. In the country's recent conflicts, youth are both perpetrators and victims of violence — as well as advocates for peace. By providing young people with tools to make change, opportunities for shared experiences that bridge communities, and leadership roles, they can build peaceful communities.

I had the opportunity to work with a diverse range of young people as chief of party for the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Transition Initiatives-funded Lebanon Civic Support Initiative. Through our civil society partners, our program worked with students, school dropouts, political leaders, social activists and others. We worked with youth in urban centers like Beirut, Tripoli and Saida and rural areas in the Beqaa, South and North regions. A key goal in development, especially on a project like LCSI, is to more effectively engage and empower youth as positive change agents. The question is, how?

Here are four lessons learned from my experiences in Lebanon.

1. Take advantage of civic opportunities to call for change.

Youth are often seen as less threatening than adults, which can sometimes open doors to decision-makers and provide them more opportunities to promote alternative, peaceful strategies. Throughout Lebanon, political parties

and other factions often use burning tires to block roads between communities and as a form of protest. To speak out against this practice, the Youth Network for Civic Activism repurposed tires in the southern town of Nabatieh, painting them in bright colors and converting them into furniture and flower pots. These symbolic pieces were designed to raise awareness of the futility of such tire-burning, and to call on residents and leaders to take constructive action.

YNCA also partnered with other groups in Nabatieh to organize a " Week of Joy ." This youth-led event used traditional music and folk dancing as a form of public protest against the politically conservative environment. It was successful because it was viewed as neutral by the community. The emphasis on the theme "joy" made it very difficult for anyone to speak out against the events. Young peoples' actions in this community, like others around the country, presented an alternative model and called on others to stand up against violence and politicization in their community.

2. Cultivate a sense of belonging through activism.

Many extremist groups use financial incentives to attract young followers, as well as the promise of community and connection to a higher purpose. To counter these powerful enticements, development groups must foster a sense of identity among youth and a belonging to something greater, more enduring and more positive. We found that youth are more likely to continue engaging with an organization if the experience creates a connection and identity, beyond a one-off activity. A sense of belonging develops over time, but youth leaders and organizations can take steps to help create it.

One local organization working on environmental issues in Lebanon fostered group identity by naming themselves "Eco Warriors." This group identity and unity was strengthened by simply selecting a name wearing branded T-shirts or other items. Forums for youth initiatives that are celebrated with the broader community, such as festivals and training graduation ceremonies, can help solidify belonging. Recognition of youth accomplishments in public forums also reinforces a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

3. Use indirect approaches to engage youth as peace builders.

Like most people, youth don't like to be lectured on the importance of conflict resolution. Framing activities as "conflict resolution" or discussing sensitive issues — such as ethnic and sectarian tensions or political violence — without first building trust can put youth off. Showing them how to foster peace in their communities through action and shared experiences is more effective.

In the northern city of Tripoli, one of our partners provided vocational training to a diverse group of youth from the area, including Sunni and Alawite Lebanese, and Syrian youth. Although they were from different religious communities, most came from economically marginalized backgrounds and faced similar challenges in their communities. Through trainings in basic construction skills, these young people became more comfortable working together. Initial tensions disappeared and friendships formed. After a series of arson attacks on shop owners of a certain religion in Tripoli, this group came together to help rehabilitate the damaged shops. In addition to supporting local residents, they provided a positive example of coexistence and resilience in the face of intolerance and violence.

4. Give youth the space to lead.

Given young peoples' openness, energy and creativity, they are especially well-positioned to come up with new ideas to address community problems. They can play a vital role in the peace-building process by modeling alternatives to violence and showing that change can be made peacefully. We need to empower youth to lead community development and advocacy initiatives so that they can inspire others to action.

And finally, we need to engage youth in activities that highlight the values of civic activism and peace building, rather than lecturing them on theories of conflict resolution. Youth have the drive and capacity to truly effect change given the chance. Our job now is to give them that chance.

Check out the Civic Activism Toolkit and other resources developed by the Lebanon Civic Support Initiative for youth and civil society organizations.

Want to learn more? Check out the Youth Will website and tweet #YouthWill.