



Investing in Young Children for Peaceful Societies: Individual and Structural Transformation: Workshop in Brief

DETAILS

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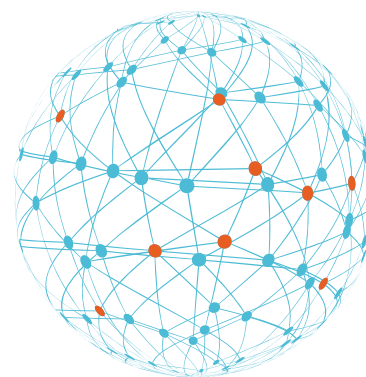
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Investing in Young Children for Peaceful Societies: Individual and Structural Transformation—Workshop in Brief

With the worst human refugee crisis since World War II as the backdrop, from March 16 to March 18, 2016, the Forum on Investing in Young Children Globally, in partnership with UNICEF and the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), held a workshop in Amman, Jordan, to explore topics related to investing in young children for peaceful societies toward individual and structural transformation. Over the course of the 3-day workshop under the patronage of Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan, researchers, policy makers, program practitioners, funders, youth, and other experts came together to understand the effects of conflict and violence on children, women, and youth across areas of health, education, nutrition, social protection, and other service domains. More broadly the workshop sought to do the following:



- Highlight the science of early childhood, identifying this period of development as perhaps the earliest stage for preventing violence within a transformative shift from understanding children and women solely as vulnerable populations to agents of change.
- Share examples of the applicability and relevance of starting with early childhood to reduce violence and promote citizenship and peace while addressing the underlying causes of the conflict, taking into account the stages of conflict and fragility of countries.
- Show examples of the effects that fleeing from conflict has on young children's health, safety, education, and nutrition; include the unique impact on children with disabilities.
- Explore potentially effective models that employ tools such as dialogue and conflict resolution to leverage the period of early childhood for efforts to sustain peace.
- Identify opportunities to contribute to the Humanitarian Summit discussion,¹ building on the evidence and challenges of investing in early child development and approaches to sustainable peace.

Pia Rebello Britto, Global Chief and Senior Advisor for Early Child Development at UNICEF, qualified the workshop objectives by stating that early childhood development and peace are often two points on a pathway that are not easily connected. Rima Salah of the Early Childhood Peacebuilding Consortium cited emerging and well-established scientific evidence from multiple disciplines that continue to substantiate the link between a child's early years and early life environment with long-term violence prevention and behaviors linked with peaceful communities. The goal of the workshop was to continue to fill in these gaps in knowledge and explore opportunities for discourse through a process of highlighting the science and dialogue.

¹ The Humanitarian Summit convened by United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in May 2016 is a global call to action aimed to reinvigorate a commitment to humanity; create concrete actions to enable countries and communities to prepare for and respond to crises; and share best practices around the world so those most affected are at the center of humanitarian action. See <https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org>.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT DURING TIMES OF CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

Demographic shifts that occur during times of conflict affect the environment in which children are raised. Mohannad Al-Nsour, Executive Director of the Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network in Jordan, explored the effect that fleeing conflict has on children's well-being. He did so by highlighting the migration patterns and demographic shifts of the current global refugee population, specifically focusing on the Syrian conflict and its impacts within Jordan and the Middle East region. Al-Nsour emphasized that the Syrian conflict is the single worst and largest driver of displacement since World War II, citing 60 million cumulative displaced people in 2014 (the most recent figure), compared to 51 million per year earlier in 2013, and 37 million in 2005. One in every 122 humans are now either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum. He highlighted that more than 50 percent of Syrian refugees displaced in the Middle East region are children. These children are placed at risk because of the limited provision and access of public health services, particularly those providing vaccinations, reproductive health, and mental health services. Furthermore, children's vulnerability is increased by the food insecurity occurring in 14 percent of refugee households. Al-Nsour pointed out that the mass population movement in the region has left children more exposed to adverse conditions affecting their growth and transition to adulthood. These demographic shifts influence how the contextual environment is able to support children, youth, families, and communities.

Rami Khouri, Senior Public Policy Fellow at American University of Beirut, Lebanon, spoke about the environment in which children today are born, grow, and mature. Khouri suggested that the early ages at which children living in the Syrian conflict are being forced to function as adults indicates the difficult situation that prevails and continues to evolve in the region. The vulnerabilities that affect children and youth are a result of the stressful conditions in the region, ones in which Khouri noted that the lasting effects on children are not yet known. Khouri suggested that these children are likely to succumb to the burdens of poverty, marginalization, vulnerability, and political despair as they reach adolescence and adulthood.

Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Professor of Peace and Conflict Resolution at American University in the United States and Senior Advisor at KAICIID, pointed out that the physical imprint of conflict is not the only detriment suffered; conflict leaves its mark on one's individual, social, and religious identity. He emphasized that in many communities in the region, religious identity development is part of the early childhood education. Thus, it is essential to be proactive in supporting early formation of a child's religious identity that is based on inclusive rather than exclusive values. Dialogue in general and interreligious dialogue in particular is an effective method in early childhood education. In the Middle East, Abu-Nimer noted that the dominant ethnic and religious sectarian identities are often used to fuel political and social conflicts. According to Abu-Nimer, the challenge lies in how to immunize the child, family, and community from being easily manipulated by symbols of their own religious identity.

LINKING THE SCIENCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD WITH CONFLICT AND PEACE

Rebello Britto cited concrete figures on the cost of conflict and violence globally (\$14.3 trillion in 2014), while noting the incalculable cost to children and their families. Rebello Britto emphasized the unprecedented rate at which a child's brain develops, particularly influenced by experience and context. She outlined a series of explicit linkages between early childhood and conflict, particularly drawing on the scientific evidence concerning the effects that toxic materials can have on brain development. Arguing that the science of early childhood development could be a transformative solution and accelerator of peace, Rebello Britto referenced the revolutionary shift that is occurring in the science of brain development, not only for lifelong health, learning, and productivity, but also for catalyzing change in societies. UNICEF and its partners' efforts in the Early Childhood Peace Consortium represent innovative efforts to bring a new solution to the world and particularly in Jordan, a country that Rebello Britto claimed has paved the way for early childhood while also recognizing the importance of youth in accelerating change away from conflict and toward sustaining peace.

Ann Masten, Regents Professor of Child Development at the University of Minnesota in the United States, argued that the effects of experiencing conflict on children can be lifelong and intergenerational. While responses differ based on age of exposure and gender, Masten stated that the chronic adversity typical of conflict situations is characterized by the accumulation of trauma, and children typically respond through a gradual functional decline. Masten defined resilience as the capacity of a child to adapt successfully to threats that may disturb his or her life in such a way that could influence the rest of his or her development. Discussing the relationship between the risk and recovery environment, Masten stated that resilience occurs when action is taken to restore the conditions for positive human development and recovery. Furthermore, she suggested that protective factors can be mobilized in instances where children have been exposed to great adversity. According to Masten, effective methods for building resilience include hope and

belief that life has meaning, quality of care, family functionality, and a supportive community environment for families to adequately care for their children, given that the most important protective systems for young children are embedded in the family. Masten concluded by stating that while there is not enough intervention research on what works best for children in different kinds of conflict situations, there is a growing body of work focusing on understanding the connections of resilience between an individual child and his or her family, community, and society. Masten credited these new research trajectories with better aligning the systems that intersect around the child so that investments in children's development, including the tools and supports they need to develop into healthy and thriving individuals, will also be promoting children's resilience alongside the resilience of future societies.

Larry Aber, the Willner Family Professor of Psychology and Public Policy at New York University in the United States, communicated key messages from his research on children in war, which he argued drew parallels to contemporary research informing action. Among those key messages, Aber articulated that violence is complex and necessitates an understanding across the continuum of what an individual experiences. His point was illustrated in findings he presented that suggest children respond differently to various contextual factors that impact their daily lives. With these findings, Aber called for interventions that support the return to normalcy for children. Aber found four predominant patterns to be representative of children's experiences in conflict: children were directly affected by conflict; children experienced loss as a result of their involvement in conflict; there was evidence of passive involvement in conflict; and there was evidence of children being extricated from conflict. To this last point, Aber found that the more children were separated from their parents, the more prosocial they became, thereby suggesting children were developing adaptive responses to their experience of war. Aber emphasized that developing peaceful societies first necessitates recognizing the complexity of violence in children's lives, and second, engaging this complexity in intervention strategies. To do so he suggested developing short-term targeted mental health and parenting interventions that can be delivered by lay community health workers by taking the common elements of both types of interventions and cross-culturally adapting them to specific contexts.

EXAMPLES OF STRATEGIES AND TOOLS FOR REDUCING VIOLENCE AND PROMOTING CITIZENSHIP ENGAGEMENT AND PEACE AMONG CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND WOMEN

The workshop brought together examples across policy, research, practice, dialogue and conflict resolution, and messaging and technology to demonstrate strategies and tools that have had measurable effectiveness in reducing violence and promoting peace. Examples highlighted at the workshop illustrate the range of actors necessary for transformation to occur. Mark Miller of the National Institutes of Health in the United States noted the breadth of research expertise necessary to understand the effects of violence on young children, which he characterized as spanning neuroscience, biology, and brain development; the clinical sciences of psychology, mental health, and social sciences; communities, populations, and contextual factors; operational and logistics; and finally implementation, which includes scaling programs to levels higher than single communities. HRH Princess Sarah Zeid of Jordan, co-chair of *Every Woman Every Child*, argued that priority areas will not become actionable until financial mechanisms change toward predictable long-term funding that reaches the needs on the ground where different actors such as community organizers, women's groups, and religion leaders are most adept at reaching individuals and families.

Existing Policy Strategies for Children in Conflict

Salah spoke not only to the vulnerabilities of women and children during times of conflict, but also to their power as agents of change and peace. Citing the growing body of evidence that is revealing the participation of women in peace making, peace building, and peace keeping, Salah stated their involvement has tangible effects on peace and security in societies, yet peace building discourse has traditionally not been inclusive of children, youth, and women. Salah questioned how to translate these voices into policies that empower women, youth, and children to assume their role as peace builders. Salah posed a series of questions to speakers eliciting responses that were grounded in each of their unique policy-based experiences.

To Princess Sarah Zeid, Salah asked what role the provision of services has in strengthening family and community cohesion, particularly in very fragile environments. Princess Sarah Zeid framed her response through a series of policy actions. These included prioritizing the sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls amid contexts when these rights remain contested, neglected, or rejected; counting everyone, everywhere, by providing birth certificates and identity cards even in the most dire of circumstances where vulnerable populations are currently denied access to services because they do not exist; and emphasizing the emotional and mental well-being of mothers so they can advocate, love, and care for their children.

To His Excellency Selim El Sayegh, Former Minister of Social Affairs, Lebanon, Salah questioned how can governments, policy makers, academia, and civil society be mobilized to harness the potential in women and children to be agents of change and peace in situations of conflict. His Excellency El Sayegh's response was framed by illustrating obstacles to policy making, and then posing a series of alternatives to overcome the obstacles. In a failed state, remarked Sayegh, it is important to move beyond the assumption that there is a policy, or policy shaping occurring, despite ongoing obligations to the needs of children and women. El Sayegh called for action in the following areas: generating statistical data to substantiate situations or interventions; allocating funds appropriately; countering the cyclical nature of extremism feeding extremism; and the shaping of culture during times of both peace and war. His Excellency El Sayegh advocated to go beyond the interministerial approach to foster dialogue that is holistic to include communication and conflict resolution strategies, and be grounded in daily living practices where in the Middle East there is still a community-based culture that occurs in shared social spaces, to which children should be central.

To Rabih El Chammay, Head of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health, Lebanon, Salah requested that he reflect on the links between mental health and peace building. El Chammay commented on the link between mental health and peace building at the policy level where he argued social justice should be the cornerstone for alignment between the two. El Chammay noted that violence and conflict are significant determinants of poor mental health. He suggested a sequencing of priorities for individuals during times of conflict, stating that emergency mental health is typically left out of the provision of other basic needs. Furthermore, Chammay argued that investments in maternal and child mental health during times of conflict would improve individual mental health outcomes in the present, and the mental disposition of societies in the long term. Doing so, Chammay hoped would assuage a society's propensity to attribute acts of violence to an individual's mental disposition too quickly when describing drivers of conflict. As an internally displaced child in Lebanon himself, El Chammay concluded with what he deemed the critical ingredient in linkages between peace building and good mental health: hope—the most powerful manifestation of life and one of the most effective engines of change in society.

To Friedrich Affolter of UNICEF, Salah posed the question of what prompted the change in the UN to consider the role of social services as critical to contributing to peace building. In reference to the work of UNICEF, Affolter questioned that when a situation demands the delivery of basic social services, could such services also be leveraged to also transform relationships between individuals and groups? In post conflict contexts, Affolter cited examples of early learning centers bringing together children of different ethnic groups, and thus also bringing together their families, a process which restored conversation, dialogue, and communication. He referenced a particular effective model from Cote d'Ivoire where kindergarten services accessible to mothers from different ethnic groups, complemented by women literacy programs as well as small business support initiatives proved effective to overcome distrust (including among men) that had burdened interethnic community lives for a prolonged period of time.

Programs Targeting Violence Against Children

Andrew Claypole, Senior Advisor, Office of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General (SRSG) on Violence against Children, juxtaposed violence on young children against child rights. He framed the notion of freedom from violence as a fundamental human right that the international community has committed to safeguard through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.² Yet despite international standards in place through the convention, he stated that violence against children continues to persist, with more than 1 billion children, particularly girls, ages 2 to 17 years exposed to violence in 2014. Furthermore, violence prevention, response services, and productivity losses cost \$7 trillion annually. The Syrian conflict has created a substantial population of unaccompanied and separated children exposed to armed violence and susceptible to abuse and exploitation, which Claypole argued negatively affects their psychological, emotional, and physical development. Claypole stated that 47 countries currently have comprehensive and explicit legal bans on all forms of violence against children, and more than 50 countries are moving toward that same goal, especially given that the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development includes for the first time a specific target under Goal 16, which calls for an end to all forms of violence against children.

Harnessing the international energy channeled toward child rights and violence issues, the SRSG launched a new initiative to galvanize political will and mobilize wide social support for children's protection from violence. The High Time to End Violence Against Children Initiative launched in March 2016 that Claypole presented calls on governments, communities, civil society, the private sector, and individual citizens to commit to bringing an end to violence against children.

² The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international human rights treaty aimed at upholding the distinct rights of children as human beings. Protected under the treaty are the civil, political, economic, social, health, and cultural rights of children.

Constanza Alarcón, Executive Director of the Foundation Alpína in Colombia, presented the situation in Colombia where armed conflict is the result of profound inequality and social exclusion. Affecting more than 7 million victims and claiming the lives of more than 1 million, this conflict has negatively impacted family, social, and cultural structures. Alarcón noted that these effects on children took time for the government of Colombia to understand, given that the perception had been that children were not the direct recipients of the conflict. Alarcón outlined a process by which the government of Colombia instituted a program to train and sensitize teachers to behaviors that were a consequence of the conflict. This included approaches toward healing that placed an emphasis on reconnecting relationships with families and friends through the use of literature and art. Alarcón stated that these efforts for addressing early childhood development amid the conditions fostered by structural violence in Colombia demonstrate how an integrated framework can be used to help children overcome their exposure to conflict.

Dialogue and Conflict Resolution Tools

Abed El Fattah El Samman, Media Trainer and Muslim preacher from Jordan, stated that the main catalyst in both peace and conflict is religion. He communicated the need to engage religious leaders, speaking from his perspective as the first Muslim in Syria to work on joint cooperation programs between Muslims and Christians through his work with the UN Development Programme. El Samman made the case that there was great value in training children on financial literacy using religion, given the prolific and illustrative parables around stealing money that exist. Doing so, El Samman suggested, would instill a nuanced understanding of the value of money in children and serve to mobilize this next generation around a purpose other than violence.

Ilham Nasser, Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at George Mason University in the United States and Senior Advisor for American Near East Refugee Aid, explored the often conflicting investment demands across children's environments and educators. Nasser reminded the workshop participants that early childhood education is neither regulated nor compulsory in many regions, yet despite this reality, the focus especially in such places should be on a holistic and integrated approach to early childhood education. She went on to question if it were possible to promote intergroup dialogue in a region where basic human needs are struggling to be met. Given the often dire circumstances amid which children need to be educated, she presented early childhood programming that laid the foundation for broader intergroup dialogue. In contexts where schools are run by religion groups, Nasser advocated for a train-the-trainer model that has been used effectively in Iraq to bring different parties from different regions together. Despite the challenges, Nasser articulated the role educators are playing in their capacity to transform individuals—and the power of education in catalyzing structural transformations for marginalized groups in conflict environments.

Nayla Tabbara, Director of the Adyan Institute in Lebanon, presented her experiences in bringing together children from different communities to build ties among identities that have otherwise been broken during times of crisis. Noting that systems of values are the first to suffer during times of conflict, Tabbara emphasized that the work of the Adyan Institute is based on a model that allows children to find points of strength within themselves and reconnect with what is good, rather than connecting with what is bad. She emphasized the importance of individuals claiming membership to their faith and evoked dialogue as a way of generating acceptance and a common understanding of differences.

Abu-Nimer appealed to workshop participants to be brave enough to understand the cultural and religious context from within and overcome barriers in engaging with local religious agencies. Learning the language of faith used by various religious constituencies is a first step in such necessary engagement. He expressed the potential gains in engaging religious leaders in building and supporting a message of peace, acceptance, and religious pluralism.

Messaging and Technology

Amalia Waxman, an independent consultant, suggested that the exploration of communication and technology tools to reduce violence and empower agents of change has specific applicability to the conditions and context of the Middle East region. Three examples of messaging and technology applications were presented.

Aber provided background information on a mobile application developed by Aleksandra Mojsilovic and Kush Varshney at IBM's Data Science Group. When fully developed, the application will help integrate social and emotional learning principles into the provision of school-based education as a way of improving students' well-being. Communication technologies and particularly tablet-based applications can overcome some of the contextual barriers to early learning practice and research in difficult settings, as was characteristic of schools across Lebanon, Niger, and Sierra Leone where the beta version of the application is currently being tested.

Moving beyond beta version applications to a mainstreamed technology platform implemented by youth, Mohanad Mohammad Abdel Raheem Tarawneh, student and President of UNICEF Jordan's Youth Network, Jeel 962,

presented the network, a volunteer organization made up of youth. Members of Jeel 962 designed an online platform that has interactive, crowd-sourcing, and geo-locating capabilities on which youth comment on civic concerns in real time. Comment categories were developed based on indicators used to assess child-friendly cities, which include functionality of infrastructure and public safety for children. Jeel 962 is the first of its kind to create an independent virtual space for youth to convene and have their voices heard while at the same time identifying problems and finding solutions to improve their communities.

Nada Elattar, Director of Educational Programs for International Social Impact at Sesame Workshop in the United States, presented efforts to provide access to quality early childhood educational content to vulnerable populations in areas most in need. Elattar emphasized that the mission of Sesame Workshop is to help kids all over the world grow smarter, stronger, and kinder. Elattar presented a film where children from across different cultures and religions came together to discuss commonalities they share, only to find they had more in common than not. These segments of Sesame programming demonstrated communication techniques to bridge intercultural dialogue in early childhood. She pointed out that Sesame's multimedia programming entails messaging to foster among young children cooperation, gender equity, and positive attitudes toward other children from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds in an effort to promote respect and understanding.

Referencing a recurring call among workshop speakers to be deliberate with messaging and integrate communication, Janine Zacharia, Lecturer at Stanford University in the United States, presented her work on the science of virtual reality and journalism, with applications to communication in conflict situations at a mass scale. Zacharia emphasized that the importance of these embodied experiences is the empathy a participant can build toward a certain situation because the brain treats these virtual experiences as if they are real. Amid the public interest and widespread adoption of virtual reality tools, Zacharia encouraged workshop participants to think about which communication technology works best in which context to enhance storytelling in ways that have enormous potential for encouraging empathy and engaging youth in some real-world problems, such as the humanitarian crisis occurring in the Middle East.

POTENTIAL AREAS FOR ACTION IDENTIFIED BY INDIVIDUAL YOUTH

Khouri emphasized that for change to take place, the voices of youth need to be heard, given that the grievances of youth very accurately reflect those of adults, and, in essence, affect the lives of young children. In the reality of the past decade, Khouri noted that youth are creating their own parallel worlds virtually online and in social and public spaces in their communities. He argued that by listening to young people, researchers and policy makers can better understand the drivers of discontent, priorities among young people, and the factors that cause a young person to go over the edge to renounce citizenship and adopt other primary identities.

Kaveh Khoshnood, Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies at the Yale School of Public Health in the United States, facilitated a discussion among youth from Jeel 962 grounded in the elements of the Declaration on Youth, Peace, and Security. Ghassan Al Helou, Media Officer for Jeel 962 in Jordan, articulated his sense that as a youth he carries the burden for his generation and for those whom follow, stating that if his generation does not have an influence on its own problems, then who else would. Several of the youth participating on the panel had an overwhelming response when asked how they prioritize their problems, stating that education was the most important issue among them. By focusing on education in their volunteer work, Tarawneh believed he and his fellow Jeel members are providing a better future for the next generation. Many of the youth panelists believed education should not be a dream, but rather a right. Yet in many of the contexts children are living in the region, education is not possible.

As the final panel of the workshop drew to a close, workshop participants took the opportunity to inquire and be inspired by the work of the youth panelists. Salah prompted the youth participating to consider what their message would be to the Special Envoy to deliver to the Humanitarian Summit. Rebello Britto urged the youth to be champions of the youngest people in the world, which would in turn bring lasting change globally. The final remarks of the youth panel were grounded in the essentiality that basic needs of children, parents, and caregivers be met, as one of the youth panelists affirmed that only then will individuals find time to raise awareness and spark change in the lives of others.◆◆

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REVIEWERS: To ensure that it meets institutional standards for quality and objectivity, this Workshop in Brief was reviewed by **Ghassan Issa**, Arab Resource Collective, and **Gillian Huebner**, Maestral International. **Lauren Shern**, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, served as the review coordinator.

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For additional information regarding the meeting, visit nationalacademies.org/hmd/activities/children/investingyoungchildrenglobally.aspx.

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