

Iraqi Young Professionals Dialogue – Concept Paper

“There is great potential in youth, but they don’t have the chance to dialogue. Always, peace talks are for the adults, and the males.”

–Member, GPIW Young Leaders Peace Council

Background

During a meeting of Iraqi women organized by the Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW) in March 2006, the women found agreement on one issue – the need to attend to the needs of young Iraqis coming of age during the current conflict, a time of life which is critical in determining their future course. Many youth are being subjected to pressure to join militias and are living in communities where violence is a fact of daily life, and find their own movement and opportunities seriously curtailed. The generation now moving into their adult years is key to the future of Iraq.

GPIW has had many years of experience working with the United Nations in organizing young leaders summits. After a series of regional summits and the organization of the UN Global Youth Leadership Summit, GPIW decided to focus on regions in greatest need in the effort to bring together, mobilize and inspire young people with a vision and understanding of how they can heal, rebuild and develop their communities.

Purpose & Goals

The goal of the Iraqi Young Leaders Dialogue is to provide a safe and neutral forum through which young people from Iraq, with a focus on the Baghdad vicinity, can come together to discuss ways to address the challenges they face in their local communities, as well as at the national level.

This dialogue will bring together Iraqis between the ages of 20 and 35 to engage in a discussion on how young people can keep alive their aspirations for peace and security, and inspire the renewal of inter-community relations. The young people of Iraq have a significant role to play in determining which direction their nation will ultimately take. This gathering aims to support Iraqi youth in shaping the vision for stability, development and peace. It will launch an Iraqi young leaders network whose primary goals would be to maintain a channel for positive communication between Iraqi youth, and to provide a platform where they can address youth concerns through open dialogue in a safe space.

Themes & Content

During a similar dialogue that GPIW organized with young people from Sudan in March 2007, we found that the issues which brought young people together and around which consensus could be found were those that provided a common threat – poverty, gender inequity, environmental destruction, and HIV/AIDS. The Sudanese participants concluded that by working together on these issues across regions, they would be able to build more peaceful relations between the regions in the country.

GPIW is suggesting a similar framework for the Iraqi Young Leaders Dialogue. The program would focus on crosscutting issues not steeped in ideological or sectarian differences. The purpose is to facilitate youth collaboration by bringing to the forefront issues that affect their daily life amidst the current conflict.

The fundamental concern that arose during consultations with the GPIW youth coordinators in Baghdad is the long-term impact of the current misunderstandings between ethnic and religious groups in Iraq. This violence and hatred has jeopardized the social fabric of their communities and the ability of young people to lead “a normal life”. Addressing this issue would be a unifying topic throughout this dialogue and viewed as the stepping-stone toward later, in depth discussions around other social issues affecting Iraqi civil society, such as health, gender equity, and the economy.

The Iraqi Young Leaders Dialogue would comprise relevant groups and areas in which youth can play an important role in forming stronger communities. The Dialogue steering committee has identified four sectors from which it would draw participants and that would form the themes for the dialogue content:

- *Media* – journalists, producers, writers
- *Education* – teachers, academics, scholars, graduate students
- *Business and Environment* – entrepreneurs and those working on environmental issues
- *Conflict resolution* – those working on interfaith and community dialogue, and other forms of mediation, and community associations.

Given the diversity of the sectors, this gathering would provide a unique opportunity to assess the progress of civil society in Iraq from the youth perspective. A measurable outcome of the Iraqi Young Leaders Dialogue could be an evaluation of the sectors and regions the young leaders consider in need of greater attention by the grassroots community. This would include defining what it means to participate in civil society through non-biased communication and efforts toward community building.

The Iraqi Young Leaders Dialogue will engage the youth in discussions around the following themes:

Media – Influences & Youth perceptions: Inviting a delegation of young Iraqi professionals working in print and broadcast, the meeting will assess the impact of the media on youth. Has the media been a positive influence in challenging misconceptions that lead to sectarian violence, or has it been an obstacle to receiving accurate information? How can youth working in this industry be encouraged toward responsible journalism, and what are the ways to ensure their safety? The dialogue will also open a discussion on methods for effective reporting, and will brainstorm the central messages being transmitted to Iraqi society today. The young leaders will be encouraged to assess the impact of negative media messages on Iraqi youth and ways young people could combat this through positive reinforcement.

Education – Dealing with challenges & new approaches: Security was cited as the foremost concern in the December 2006 UNESCO report on the state of education in Iraq. In universities, professors and students are besieged by the militia presence and life threatening circumstances. In other instances, youth and teachers are blocked from traveling, so school attendance on both ends is detrimentally low. How then do students and academic leaders account for education during Iraq’s crisis? The discussion would tap into and expand upon

alternatives young teaching professionals have implemented to help keep young people literate and informed. The dialogue would also seek suggestions on how to integrate a peace and community-building dialogue into the Iraqi university and elementary curriculums.

Environment & Business – Bridging divides through partnerships: Both the environment and business are critical sectors to aide community unification by generating initiatives that bring various sectors and people together. The dialogue would explore collective youth responses to pressing environmental issues in Iraq, such as desertification, access to clean & fresh water, and the ecological impact of the war's chemicals and weapons. Similarly, business initiatives could be the basis for unique partnerships to emerge between people of differing ethnic or religious backgrounds, but who hold similar visions of economic development for the country.

Conflict Resolution – Youth responses & building community trust: How can youth contribute to a culture of non-violence in Iraq? Drawing on the Gandhi principles of non-violence, the dialogue will open a neutral discussion on the impact of conflict on Iraqi society and what civil society can do collectively to find stability. GPIW trainers working in conflict resolution and community healing, would facilitate this theme by introducing non-violent principles that can be implemented on the individual level, eventually moving to the family and finally within community. Dialogue emphasis would be placed on youth responses to violence through positive and peaceful action by deemphasizing reaction. Trainings would include ways to communicate across ethnic and religious lines, and would deal with the issue of youth identity. The goal of this exploration and skills building is to support a culture of trust among Iraqi youth. Upon returning to their community they would be instruments for expressing new ways of interaction, which, as it spreads, could eventually lessen the intensity of mistrust that has influenced much of the current violence.

The sub-topics to be covered from the above themes are:

- Communications skills for dialogue and problem solving
- Overcoming sectarian divisions
- Building national unity through civil society youth initiatives
- Coping with issues of security – youth responses
- Forming youth cooperatives around education – so as not to leave a generation behind
- Transparency and accountability
- Iraqi models for healing and reconciliation – what works in the Iraqi cultural context?

In past dialogues with young leaders from areas of conflict, youth have cited the misuse and politicization of the peace process in their country as a hindrance to genuine community dialogue. GPIW believes that individual healing benefits the community as a whole and helps to support a climate of peace and stability. Thus, the Iraqi Young Leaders Dialogue will be structured to address four human principles and values throughout each theme:

- Cultivating understanding and compassion for what youth from different ethnic or religious groups, or regions, have experienced as a result of the conflict;
- Building a culture of mutual respect for all regions and groups and a commitment to pluralism, giving equal value to all peoples;
- Promoting understanding of human rights as it relates to gender equity;
- Affirming the value of transparency and the responsibilities of civil society.

Structure

A. Delegates

Over the course of 5 days, 40 young adults from the Shiite, Sunni, Kurdish and Christian communities would convene for this dialogue. Drawing upon the model of the Sudan Youth Dialogue of March 2007, the Iraqi Young Leaders Dialogue will comprise youth, with a focus on the Baghdad region, from varying ethnic groups, as well as varying sectors. Due to logistic limitations as a result of the ongoing conflict, majority of the youth (approximately 75%) will come from the Baghdad region, and the remaining 25% will be sought from other regions.

The criteria for youth selection have been established from five previous youth dialogues organized by GPIW in collaboration with the UN. GPIW has found the following characteristics and guidelines most important for participation:

1. Gender balance - 50% women & 50% men.
2. Ethnic & religious balance (Shiite, Sunni, Christian, Kurdish)
3. Age: 20 to 35 (young community leaders & graduate students).
4. Demonstrated active involvement in development activities or community initiatives.
5. Demonstrated leadership in his/her field of work or study. An active voice of youth within the community.
6. Special consideration for young people working in grassroots development. All sectors are of interest: health, human rights, environment, business, civil society, gender, culture, etc.

Additionally, the young Iraqis will be joined by a small delegation of young community builders from other countries, particularly countries impacted by conflict and/or have implement a national reconciliation process. GPIW has found that integrating youth who bring a neutral and objective perspective has been beneficial to the atmosphere and general goodwill of the dialogue participants. Often coming from conflict regions or post-conflict nations themselves, the international delegates offer alternative perspectives on how to deal with similar situations, as well as ideas on how the international community can help support their community building efforts.

International youth are being considered from South Africa, Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina, East Timor, Kuwait and Lebanon.

B. Venue - Dialogue in a Safe Space

Through our organization of initiatives with Palestinians and Israelis, Sudanese, and Iraqi (Christian, Sunni and Shiite), we have found that the best place for an open and honest meeting is neutral territory, far enough from the region so as not to raise fears or inhibit serious engagement. We have also found that being in an open space, surrounded by nature, helps set a neutral tone for interaction and creates an environment for meaningful dialogue.

We would intersperse the working sessions with times for walks, inspirational readings and private reflection so that the participants could benefit from some of the healing aspects of being in nature.

C. Partnership – USIP & GPIW

The Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW) would work with its network of Iraqi women on the ground to identify young leaders. It would develop the inter-religious, healing and reconciliation components of the dialogue program and facilitation drawing on the expertise of GPIW international co-chairs.

The United States Institute for Peace would be responsible for leading training on communication skills and capacity building, as well as best practices in community building through transparency and civil society participation.

History

In June 2004, through a partnership with the United Nations, the Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW) made a commitment to support the peace-building efforts of young leaders worldwide. The first gathering in this initiative was the Pan-African Youth Leadership Summit held in Dakar, Senegal organized jointly by the United Nations, the government of Senegal and GPIW. Subsequent to this meeting, GPIW and the UN convened pan-regional summits for young leaders throughout Latin America held in Brazil, and throughout Asia held in Hiroshima, as well as a follow up Pan-African meeting in Morocco with the support of the Royal Kingdom of Morocco. This youth leadership series around the Millennium Development Goals culminated at the United Nations headquarters in New York at the UN Global Youth Leadership Summit in October 2006. The youth series has given way to the Young Leaders International Peace Council organized under the GPIW network, which was officially formed at the second Pan-African Youth Leadership Summit in August 2005. The members have committed to playing an active role in transforming conflict, promoting healing and reconciliation, and in addressing the causes that lead to violence. The first initiative of the Peace Council was the Sudan Youth Dialogue in March 2007.

The Iraqi Young Leaders Dialogue will receive administrative and organizational support from the Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW). GPIW believes when people begin to dialogue in real time and in a real space, the feasibility of working together toward community advancement becomes an achievable goal. GPIW invests in young adult programs because young people have demonstrated and expressed, in past dialogues, that youth do not always feel as strongly those differences that divide and are able bond with other young people.