

Innovations in Peacebuilding

Helping young people prevent violence in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza

Challenges for young leaders

Violence is a continual source of anxiety in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. For decades, the Israeli occupation has undermined stability in the occupied Palestinian territory. Meanwhile, rival political parties and social movements have stirred conflicts within Palestinian communities.

Although governments and NGOs have devoted much attention to addressing Israeli-Palestinian issues, their investments often overlook nonviolence education and youth outreach. This is unfortunate because the region is experiencing a dramatic population boom, and few services exist to help young people become the positive leaders that their communities need.



Youth Ambassadors worked with communities to identify sources of violence and develop solutions. In Gaza, participants wrote, filmed and produced *On the Pavement*. The film conveys the importance of children's rights and women's rights. Khalil Ansara/CRS.

The CRS approach

Catholic Relief Services and Middle East Nonviolence and Democracy launched the Youth Voices for Community Action (YVCA) project in 2009. The program targeted 360 youths between the ages of 18 and 25, establishing youth groups in six urban centers—Gaza City, Hebron, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nablus and Ramallah. YVCA received funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

First, youth participants completed Nonviolence Adventure Camps, which were designed to help youths build their self-esteem, teamwork and leadership skills, problem-solving abilities and appreciation of cultural differences. Youth Ambassadors were selected and then received intensive training in conflict resolution and mediation techniques, coalition-building strategies, context analysis and project cycle management.

In their communities, Youth Ambassadors conducted in-depth interviews, focus groups and town hall meetings to identify elements of conflict. Youth team members analyzed the results and developed community action plans for addressing the issues. Then they worked with communities to implement their projects. Youths also participated in meetings



This young woman's sign says, "I hope to be an athlete." Youth Voices for Community Action sought to empower women by changing communities' attitudes about gender roles and women's rights. Khalil Ansara/CRS.



Eleven of the 22 projects involved preventing child-to-child violence or violence against children. In this photo, students from Gaza watch a performance about nonviolence. *Khalil Ansara/CRS.*

with national-level decision makers and international organizations to address the issues that lead to conflict in their communities.

Results

YVCA trained 392 young adults through six camps in the West Bank and Gaza. Youths designed and implemented 18 programs to promote tolerance and prevent violence. Four more projects are currently being implemented.

Eleven projects involved preventing violence against children. Youth Ambassadors in Gaza used story sessions, games and workshops about nonviolence, tolerance and child care to reach 360 children and 55 parents. In Jerusalem, one project targeted child-to-child violence by educating students and then hosting art, dance, drama and

sports activities to reinforce the message. The Bethlehem group worked with violent children to improve their behavior. A project in Nablus brought together teachers, parents, students and mental health professionals to raise awareness about ways to prevent violence in the Rafidia Girls School and the Balata Boys School.

Other projects targeted violence against women. In Gaza, Youth Ambassadors hosted workshops and seminars for 180 women and 35 men to raise awareness about domestic violence and women's rights. In Bethlehem, YVCA strengthened women's self-esteem, job skills and independence by hosting computer training workshops. Youth Ambassadors in the conservative village of Bani Naim convinced a recreational facility to provide swimming lessons for women. They installed a roof over the pool so that women could swim in a culturally acceptable manner.

YVCA also worked to ease tensions that stemmed from religious, class and environmental issues. Community members of diverse backgrounds collaborated to install street lights in Aboud, plant trees in Hebron, construct bus shelters in Ramallah, film advocacy videos in Gaza and paint peace murals throughout the occupied Palestinian territory.

Looking Ahead

Youth Voices for Community Action helped youths become leaders in their communities. Throughout the program, these young people served as role models for children, as sources of empowerment for women and as vital links between religious and secular groups. Because youth teams sought feedback and support from their neighbors throughout the process, many communities have now begun to address the human rights issues that emerged. Indeed, the Youth Ambassadors have shown that peaceful solutions are possible to achieve through education and nonviolence.