

COMMUNITY DIALOGUE AS A PEACEBUILDING TOOL: INSIGHTS FROM ENVIRONMENTAL DIALOGUE IN THE NINEVEH PLAINS OF IRAQ

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I. Introduction

Iraq is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Throughout the country, communities are seeing their livelihoods and everyday lives increasingly disrupted by scorching temperatures, water scarcity, extended droughts and dust storms.¹ While the impacts of the climate crisis are widely felt, they can be especially pernicious in conflict-affected contexts as climate change exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and increases the risk of insecurity.² This intersection of climate change and conflict presents a significant challenge in the Nineveh Plains, one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse regions of Iraq.

Nineveh is home to Arab, Assyrian, Chaldean, Kaka'i, Shabak, Syriac, Turkmen and Yazidi communities.³ Many of these communities still carry the collective trauma linked to years of repression and forced Arabization campaigns pursued by the Ba'athist regime.⁴ The ongoing struggle between the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government over administrative authority in different localities in Nineveh has also contributed to mistrust and fraught relations between the different communities caught in the middle.⁵ The Islamic State (IS) group occupied Nineveh between 2014 and 2017. During that time, it sought to destroy the diversity of the region by targeting ethnic and religious communities and their ways of life.⁶ IS occupation brought even more violence to a context

¹ SIPRI and NUPI, *Iraq: Climate, Peace and Security*, Fact sheet (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2023).

² Black, R. et al., *Environment of Peace: Security in a New Era of Risk* (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2022).

³ It is important to note that group designations are subject to debate. E.g. some use the term 'Assyrian' to encompass all Christians in Iraq, including Chaldeans and Syriacs, while others consider 'Christian' to be the broader term. This project uses the latter, as many of the research participants used it to identify themselves or to refer to their group.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, 'On vulnerable ground: Violence against minority communities in Nineveh province's disputed territories', Press release, 10 Nov. 2009.

⁵ Meier, D., "'Disputed territories' in northern Iraq: The frontiering of in-between spaces', *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2020), pp. 351–71; see also O'Driscoll, D. and van Zoonen, D., 'Governing Nineveh after the Islamic State: A solution for all components', *Middle East Research Institute*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2016).

⁶ European Parliament, Resolution 2016/2529 (RSP) on the Systematic Mass Murder of Religious Minorities by the So-called 'ISIS/Daesh'; and Isakhan, B., 'How to interpret ISIS's heritage destruction', *Current History*, vol. 117, no. 803 (2018), pp. 344–49.

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SUMMARY

● This SIPRI Research Policy Paper examines the linkages between climate and environmental issues and the dynamics of peace and conflict in the Nineveh Plains of Iraq. It focuses on how local community dialogue can play a part in addressing climate and environmental challenges while also helping to build peace and strengthen inter-community relations. The Research Policy Paper presents the outcomes of several rounds of community dialogue on environmental issues and the impacts of climate change in the Nineveh Plains organized in 2022–23. It makes recommendations on how to harness the potential of local community dialogues in environmental peacebuilding.

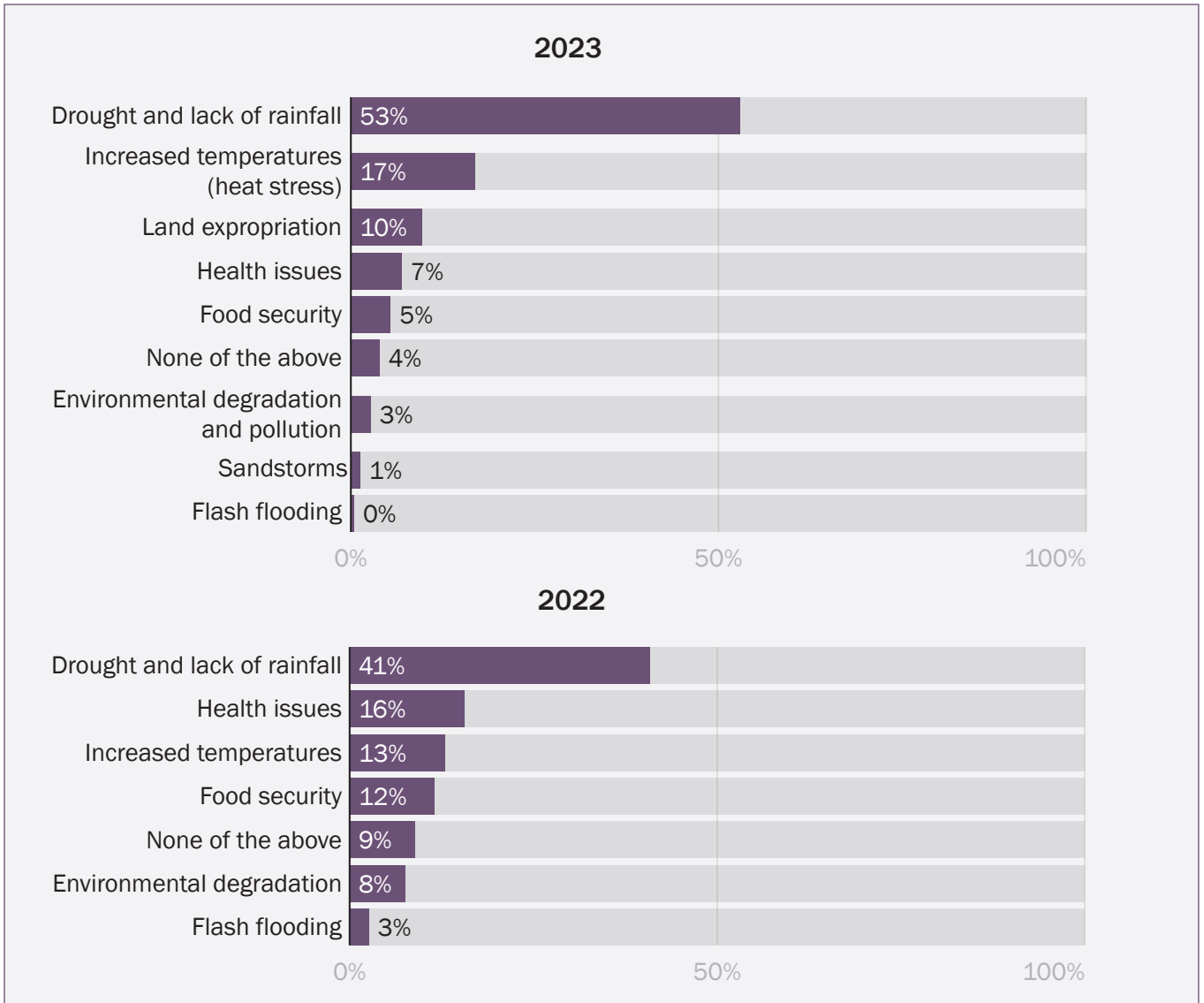


Figure 1. Aspects of climate change with the most impact on the Nineveh Plains

Note: Participants could provide more than one response. Land expropriation and sandstorms were added to the list of options in the 2023 survey.

Source: SIPRI and TAD, 2022–2023.

already marked by insecurity since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. IS was eventually defeated but the damage to social cohesion and intercommunal relations has been severe.⁷ IS occupation and its repercussions have seriously limited the opportunities for interaction between communities. Tensions between communities are compounded by the impact of climate change, which undermines livelihoods and creates competition for resources.

This SIPRI Research Policy Paper examines the linkages between climate and environmental issues and the dynamics of peace and conflict in the Nineveh Plains of Iraq. Its focus is on how local community dialogue can play a part in addressing climate and environmental challenges while also helping to build peace and strengthen inter-community relations.

⁷ Bourhrous, A., Fazil, S. and O'Driscoll, D., *Post-conflict Reconstruction in the Nineveh Plains* (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2022).



The Research Policy Paper presents the outcomes of several rounds of community dialogue on environmental issues and the impacts of climate change in the Nineveh Plains organized in 2022–23 (ten community dialogue meetings and two meetings with community leaders). It makes recommendations on how to harness the potential of local community dialogues in environmental peacebuilding. The community dialogues were informed by the findings of two household surveys—the first in 2022, with 696 participants, and the second in 2023, with 1002 participants—and two rounds of interviews with 42 community members in 2022 and 40 community members in 2023. The surveys and the interviews were conducted in the districts of Al-Hamdaniya and Tal Kayf, and the Bashiqa subdistrict of Mosul.

II. Impact of climate change on agriculture and the environment in the Nineveh Plains

Impact of climate change on agriculture

Agriculture is the main economic activity in the Nineveh Plains. During IS occupation, agriculture and farmlands were devastated. Orchards, olive groves and crops were not only decimated by the fighting, but also deliberately targeted by IS fighters. Seven years after the defeat of IS, people in the Nineveh Plains are still struggling to restore farming and other agricultural activities.⁸ The impacts of climate change compound these difficulties and challenges.

According to the survey results, drought and the lack of rainfall is the aspect of climate change that is having the most impact on communities, with 41 per cent of respondents viewing this as the aspect of climate change that has the greatest impact on the Nineveh Plains (see figure 1). This increased to 53 per cent in the 2023 survey. Increasing temperatures are also seen as having a considerable impact. It is notable that the percentage of respondents who selected ‘none of the above’ decreased from 9 per cent in 2022 to 4 per cent in 2023.

The survey data showed gender differences in how the impact of climate change is perceived and experienced. Women considered health issues, increasing temperatures and food insecurity to be the aspects of climate change with the most impact, while drought rated higher for male respondents. This might be connected to prevailing gender roles in the Nineveh Plains. Men tend to be more involved in agriculture and land cultivation, and are therefore arguably more likely to perceive drought to be the most impactful aspect of climate change for their community.

Experiences also vary across localities. In the district of Al-Hamdaniya, for example, according to the 2022 survey, the proportion of respondents that perceived drought and lack of rainfall as having the biggest impact is highest in Nimrud (61 per cent) and lowest in Bartella (35 per cent). This is likely connected to Nimrud being an agricultural area while Bartella is an urban centre. In the 2023 survey, the proportion of Bartella respondents who saw drought and the lack of rainfall as having the biggest impact had increased to 41 per cent.

⁸ Bourhrous, Fazil and O’Driscoll (note 7).



Finding grazing for livestock is becoming increasingly difficult for local farmers. This limited access is linked to the heavy securitization of the area and the effects of climate change on the availability of pasture. Many farmers face rising prices for fodder, seeds, fertilizer and fuel. One Shabak community leader explained that ‘most of the people in my area rely on cattle farming. Unable to find pasture, they are increasingly forced to buy feed, which has become more expensive. The burdens of cattle breeding have thus increased, leaving a smaller profit margin’.⁹ Similarly, a Kaka’i community leader stated: ‘prices have increased, including the price of the fuel that we need for generators to operate wells and irrigation systems. How can we cultivate land when fuel prices are high and when fertilizer is more expensive? All of this affects agriculture’.¹⁰

In a region where agriculture is predominantly rainfed, limited rainfall and drought, coupled with constraints on the ability to install irrigation systems, have increasingly resulted in significant income losses and economic hardship. The threat to people’s livelihoods is forcing many to abandon farming, leave the Nineveh Plains and migrate to the cities in search of other economic opportunities.

Climate change and environmental degradation in the Nineveh Plains

Environmental degradation is another problem widely reported by respondents. Many pointed out that the loss of arable land and the shrinking of green spaces increase the exposure of the region to recurring extreme weather events, such as heat stress and dust storms. In addition to climate-induced desertification, the destruction of many orchards and olive groves during the IS occupation has deprived the region of a green belt that blocked dust storms and had a cooling effect when temperatures were high. Increasing urbanization and the use of agricultural land for residential projects are also viewed as having contributed to environmental degradation, which in turn aggravates the impacts of climate change. Some interviewees also highlighted the deleterious environmental and public health impacts of emissions from generators that use low quality fuel, as well as practices such as burning refuse.

III. Local community dialogues on environmental issues as a peacebuilding tool

There are multiple and complex linkages between environmental and climate-related issues and the dynamics of peace and conflict. For example, competition over natural resources such as land, water and minerals is widely recognized as an important driver of violence and conflict.¹¹ There is a growing literature on how the impacts of climate change can exacerbate tensions and increase the risk of violent conflict. Some of the identified pathways from climate change to violent conflict include worsening livelihood conditions, forced displacement and population movements, and the

⁹ Male Shabak community leader, Bashiqa, interview with the enumerator, Mar. 2022.

¹⁰ Male Kakai community leader, Qaraqosh, interview with the enumerator, Mar. 2022.

¹¹ Collier, P. and Hoeffler, A., ‘Resource rents, governance, and conflict’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 49, no. 4 (2005), pp. 625–33.



shifting tactics of armed groups, as well as opportunities for resource capture and elite exploitation of disasters and climate-related challenges.¹²

At the same time, climate change can also have important implications for the sustainability of peacebuilding initiatives and the effectiveness of post-conflict reconstruction processes.¹³ Environmental peacebuilding has emerged as a field concerned with understanding how peaceful inter-community relations can be built through cooperation on environmental issues.¹⁴ The underlying rationale is that constraints on the availability of natural resources are not just a driver of violent conflict, but can be a catalyst for peace and cooperation.¹⁵ There is growing interest in understanding and harnessing the peacebuilding opportunities presented by cooperation on environmental issues, natural resource governance and climate change adaptation.

Community dialogue is an important avenue for advancing cooperation on environmental and climate-related issues at the local level. The benefits of community dialogue and its potential to contribute to peacebuilding and conflict prevention are widely recognized.¹⁶ Dialogue enables people from different communities to gain an understanding of the worldviews and perspectives of others, creating the space needed to find common ground on issues of common concern.¹⁷ Conflict-affected communities can use dialogue to address existing grievances and take steps towards reconciliation and recovery. Dialogue on an issue such as the impacts of climate change brings people together to discuss solutions to a problem they share but are not in conflict over, which in turn can bring communities closer.

Although there are many approaches to dialogue, ‘sustained dialogue’ is particularly useful for understanding how local community dialogue can contribute to transforming conflictual relations and help steer them in the direction of greater cooperation. Sustained dialogue is ‘a systematic, prolonged dialogue among small groups of representative citizens committed to changing conflictual relationships, ending conflict and building peace. It is more structured than a good conversation; it is less structured than formal mediation and negotiation. It has purpose, destination and product’.¹⁸ Sustained dialogue is thus to people and communities what diplomacy, mediation and negotiation are to governments and states. It focuses not just on problem-solving, but also on human relationships between individuals and groups. It can thus be at the centre of a ‘public peace process’ in which people develop and exercise their capacity to transform conflictual relations through deliberation and by acting together.¹⁹

¹² Mobjörk, M., Krampe, F. and Tarif, K., *Pathways of Climate Insecurity* (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2020).

¹³ Bourhrous, A. ‘Climate change and post-conflict reconstruction in the Nineveh Plains of Iraq’, SIPRI, 2023; and Krampe, F. et al., ‘Climate change and peacebuilding: Sub-themes of an emerging research agenda’, *International Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 3 (2024), pp. 1111–30.

¹⁴ Ide, T. et al., ‘The past and future(s) of environmental peacebuilding’, *International Affairs*, vol. 97, no. 1 (2021), pp. 1–16.

¹⁵ See e.g. the literature on cooperation on transboundary water resources. Abukhater, A., *Water as a Catalyst for Peace: Transboundary Water Management and Conflict Resolution* (Routledge: New York, 2013).

¹⁶ Feller, E. and Ryan, K., ‘Definition, necessity, and Nansen: Efficacy of dialogue in peacebuilding’, *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 4 (2012), pp. 351–80; see also Kadayifci-Orellana, A., ‘Inter-religious dialogue and peacebuilding’, ed., C. Cornille, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Wiley: Manchester, 2013).

¹⁷ Gruener, S., Smith, S. and Hald, M. (eds), ‘Dialogue in peacebuilding: Understanding different perspectives’, *Development Dialogue*, no. 64. (2019).

¹⁸ Saunders, H., *A Public Peace Process* (Palgrave: New York, 1999), p. 12.

¹⁹ Saunders (note 18).

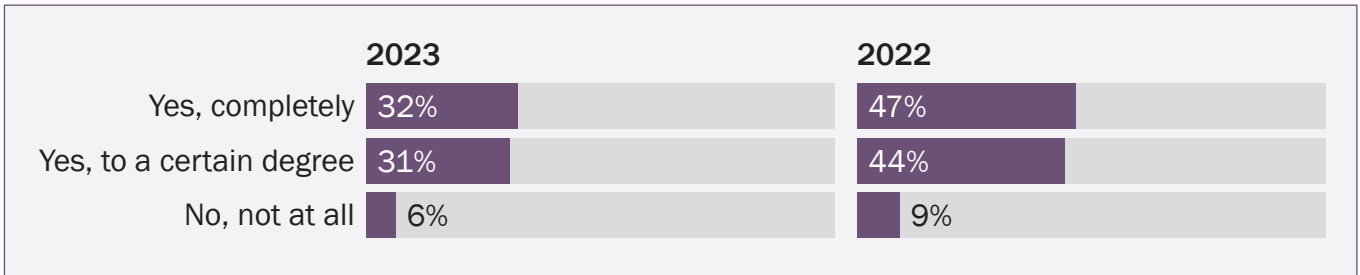


Figure 2. Do you think local community meetings focused on specific issues can improve cooperation between different communities?

Source: SIPRI and TAD, 2022–2023.

In the Nineveh Plains, the survey results show that the vast majority of respondents perceive community dialogue in a positive way. A combined total of 91 per cent of respondents agreed that local community meetings focused on specific issues could improve cooperation between different communities (47 per cent responded ‘yes, completely’ and 44 per cent responded ‘yes, to a certain degree’) (see figure 2). This trend was confirmed in the 2023 survey. The interviews also showed a willingness of people in the region to engage in dialogue. One interviewee from Qaraqosh agreed that cooperation could be improved ‘through dialogue, societal dialogue, and converging points of view. From what I see, each component [community] is closed in on itself, and no one would hear from the others, which means that there is no positive communication between them. But these dialogue sessions can be a space for people to communicate with each other and maybe form friendships and correct misconceptions’.²⁰

IV. Insights from community dialogues in the Nineveh Plains

Over a period of two years, ten rounds of local community dialogue were held to discuss the impacts of climate change on agriculture and the environment in the Nineveh Plains. These dialogue meetings brought together community members from different ethnic and religious groups, and from different backgrounds and occupations, such as farmers, students, journalists, civil society activists and agricultural engineers. Each round of dialogue had around 17 participants, and efforts were made to achieve gender and ethno-sectarian balance. The same participants were invited to attend the different meetings and a number of them remained committed to the dialogue process. However, the process was open and inclusive as each meeting also included new participants. To increase perceptions of fairness and participants’ ownership of the process, the meeting venue rotated between the project’s target localities—Bashiqa, al-Hamdaniya and Tal Kayf.

Two dialogue sessions were also organized with community leaders and local authorities at the end of the first year and again at the end of the second year. These meetings brought together local representatives from the departments of water, agriculture and planning in the Nineveh Plains, mayors and municipal officials, and representatives of agricultural cooperatives and farmers’ associations. The purpose of these meetings was to present the outcomes of the community dialogues to local leaders and help them understand

²⁰ Male Kakai community member, Qaraqosh, interview with the enumerator, Mar. 2023.



the needs and concerns of the communities, on the one hand, and to provide an occasion for community members to have direct exchanges with relevant local authorities and community leaders on issues of concern, on the other. All the dialogue meetings were moderated by skilled and experienced facilitators from the al-Tahreer Association for Development.

Dialogue meetings on the impacts of climate change on agriculture and environment

The dialogue meetings took place in a cordial atmosphere without incident or tensions between participants. Overall, participants demonstrated a strong interest in discussing climate-related and environmental issues in Nineveh and how these affect their communities and their livelihoods. The facilitators played an important role in ensuring that the discussions remained focused, while allowing participants to share their thoughts and lived experiences. Since the facilitators had a deep understanding of the context and the local dynamics of Nineveh, they were able to connect the different views, clarify misunderstandings and identify common ground. During the discussions, there was significant consensus among participants on the importance of working together to address the impacts of climate change. This agreement indicates that climate and environmental issues are a common concern for the different communities and that they can provide common ground for promoting cooperation. The dialogue participants had a shared understanding of the situation and a shared interest in improving it. Their active engagement was perhaps also linked to the nature of the topic. Climate change and environmental degradation are viewed as pressing issues that require urgent action but are not so sensitive as to give rise to immediate tensions between participants. In this way, climate and environmental issues constituted a fitting entry point for local dialogue in the Nineveh Plains.

The dialogue sessions were also an occasion for people from different communities to interact with each other. The facilitators observed a noticeable change in interactions as people warmed to each other and engaged in conversation during coffee breaks. At the end of each dialogue session, participants were seen to exchange phone numbers in order to keep in touch. Since the participants were invited to take part in multiple rounds of dialogue, they had an opportunity to meet several times, which was conducive to building relationships between participants.

During the dialogue sessions, one proposed solution for mitigating the impacts of climate change was to plant trees and create community gardens and green spaces. Participants discussed the possibility of organizing campaigns to encourage schoolchildren to plant trees and of providing nursery plants that people could plant in front of their houses. With regard to agriculture, there was extensive agreement on the need to invest in modern irrigation techniques to support farmers in Nineveh and to create more spaces for different farmers to meet and exchange knowledge and experience. Developing farmers' technical skills and facilitating their access to agricultural extension training to improve productivity were also viewed as important ways to increase the resilience of the agricultural sector in the Nineveh Plains.



One example of how the dialogue sessions created opportunities for concrete action is the invitation extended by a local journalist to the other participants to discuss climate change and environmental degradation on the local radio programme he hosts, to increase awareness of these issues. Another concrete action undertaken by an environmental activist was the planting of 125 trees in Bartella together with a group of residents in cooperation with the Nineveh Environment Directorate.

At the same time, participants in the community dialogues strongly emphasized that climate-related and environmental issues in the Nineveh Plains are inseparable from the broader challenges of governance and political economy in Iraq, which require government action and a commitment to implementing comprehensive strategic reforms. These include implementing plans to diversify away from hydrocarbon dependence, pursuing policies to support agriculture and farmers, and enacting measures to address water scarcity. While this is important to keep in mind, it does not, however, preclude or diminish the role of local governance and citizen participation. As many participants pointed out, there is space for local cooperative solutions and community-led efforts to address climate-related and environmental issues.

Lessons from community dialogues in Nineveh

The community dialogues in Nineveh show that this process has the potential to be an effective tool in peacebuilding efforts. Gathering people from different communities to discuss and jointly address issues of common concern, such as the impacts of climate change on their community, can foster mutual understanding and promote cooperation between communities. This in turn has the potential to prevent tensions and conflict, and open further pathways to reconciliation and recovery. Many participants reported that the opportunity to meet and exchange with people from different communities had been one of the most rewarding aspects of their participation. Others appreciated the chance to interact and discuss common concerns directly with local authorities and community leaders. The final meetings with community leaders and local authorities functioned as a form of town hall meeting in which citizens had an opportunity to call on officials to address their concerns and provide institutional support to citizen-led initiatives.

However, while the dialogue meetings were characterized by wide agreement among participants on the impacts of climate change on agriculture and the environment in the Nineveh Plains, implementation of proposed solutions has been limited. Dialogue meetings can be useful and productive on many different levels but to have a greater impact, they generally need to be sustained over time, with frequent follow-up. This is true of dialogue meetings both between people from different communities and with community leaders and local authorities. Sustaining these dialogues over time is important to ensure that communities have a sense that ideas and proposed solutions have a pathway to concrete implementation at the level of local governance, and that political decisions and actions are anchored in local communities and their ideas. It also further consolidates relationship building between participants and fosters greater confidence in local governance.



Failure to achieve some form of implementation, however modest, runs the risk of reducing the confidence of participants in the value and usefulness of engaging in the dialogue process, thereby undermining it as a whole. Many people highlighted during the interviews that openness and readiness to participate in community dialogue depend on whether concrete, long-term initiatives follow. Nonetheless, the need for results should not obscure the importance of the process in its own right. It is therefore crucial to acknowledge that dialogue can be a slow process that might not yield immediately visible results. A community leader from Tal Kaif noted:

Such dialogue meetings are very important; they are sometimes viewed as wasting time, but still, they can have impact. Their impact might not be visible but even the fact that it can bring different groups to sit together and discuss is already useful. They will learn how to express and listen to others' experience. It is also a great opportunity to learn about others' feelings and grievances. There are ethnic and religious groups that do not know about other groups or their culture. We will not be able to see the results of these meetings directly, but they help to create a culture of dialogue instead of resorting to violence, and it reduces tensions.²¹

A final important point to take into account is the scope of the questions discussed in community dialogues and ensuring that discussions focus on initiatives that people and communities can undertake together at the local level. While it is crucial to recognize that in many respects these issues are inseparable from broader challenges of governance, it is essential that participants avoid becoming discouraged by obstacles and issues that are beyond their control.

V. Conclusion and recommendations

While the impacts of climate change can increase the likelihood of tensions between communities, for example linked to a deterioration in livelihoods or competition for scarce resources, they can also provide an incentive for cooperation and be a catalyst for peace. What poses a challenge for peacebuilding can be transformed into opportunities for peacebuilding. Here, community dialogues can be a useful tool. Dialogue meetings offer opportunities for people to encounter and interact with others. They create space for people to share their own experiences and to get to know and understand the experiences of others. Dialogue can bring people closer together and help to transform conflictual relationships. A focus on climate change and environmental issues through community dialogues, as in Nineveh, encourages collective action to address the impacts of climate change while at the same time offering opportunities to build peace and strengthen social cohesion between different groups.

This Research Policy Paper makes recommendations on the use of local community dialogues as a tool for environmental peacebuilding and peacebuilding more broadly. While they are based on insights from the case of the Nineveh Plains, they are also applicable to other contexts.

²¹ Male Christian community leader, Tal Kaif, Interview with the enumerator, Mar. 2022.



Recommendations

Recognize the peacebuilding potential of community dialogues. Peacebuilding actors should integrate community dialogues into their programmes. Dialogue meetings offer many opportunities for environmental peacebuilding and peacebuilding more generally.

Focus on issues of common concern. A focus on issues of common concern provides opportunities for inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding that is developed and owned by local communities and firmly anchored in their everyday lives.

Use climate change and environmental issues as an entry point for local community dialogue and peacebuilding. While dialogue meetings are useful for environmental peacebuilding, climate and environmental issues also constitute a fitting entry point for local dialogue as they are pressing issues of common concern that require joint action and solutions but often not too sensitive to give rise to tensions and conflict.

Rely on experienced facilitators. To be successful, it is important that facilitators have experience of steering dialogue meetings and an excellent understanding of the perspectives of different groups and communities.

Ensure the involvement of community leaders and local authorities. Involving community leaders and local authorities creates an opportunity for participants to discuss and exchange directly with decision makers. The impact of the participation of local leaders in dialogue will be more consequential if it comes with guarantees and a steadfast commitment to support citizen-led solutions.

Focus discussions on initiatives that people and communities can undertake together at the local level. While it is crucial to recognize that many issues are inseparable from broader challenges of governance, it is important to focus on the possibilities of cooperation and solutions at the local level that engage communities directly.

Design pilot projects and facilitate implementation of small initiatives as a starting point. Participants are more likely to have confidence in and remain committed to dialogue if they see that the process is likely to result in concrete outcomes. Small pilot projects should be designed to demonstrate that joint solutions to issues of common concern are possible.

Ensure that dialogue is sustained over time. To allow relationships to develop, it is essential to create multiple opportunities for participants to meet. Creating follow-up mechanisms also helps participants to envisage pathways to concrete implementation of their ideas and proposed solutions.



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SIPRI RESEARCH POLICY PAPER

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