



## Best Practice – Strengthening social cohesion in Ninewa, Iraq

The example of the Ninewa District Working Groups (DWGs)



Implemented by

**giz** Deutsche Gesellschaft  
für Internationale  
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

In cooperation with

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INTERNATIONAL  
CONSULTING

**PEACE  
PARADIGMS**

# Imprint

As a federally owned enterprise, GIZ supports the German Government in achieving its objectives in the field of international cooperation for sustainable development.

**Published by**  
Deutsche Gesellschaft für  
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Registered offices  
Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

Strengthening Resilience in Dealing with Crises  
and Conflicts in Ninewa (SRN), Iraq  
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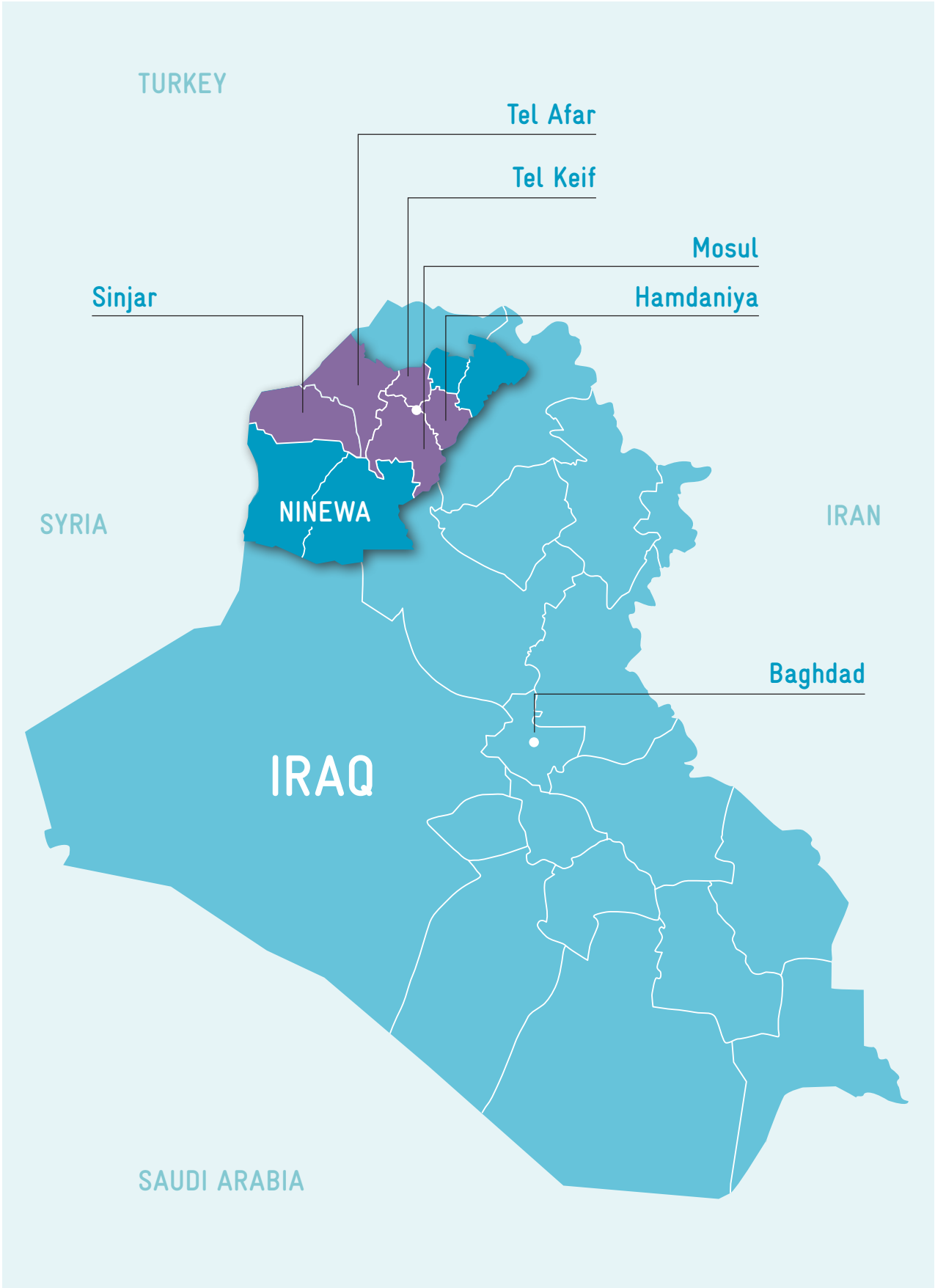
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Erbil, Iraq 2023

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# Introduction

The aim of this document is to provide an example of best practice for peacebuilding practitioners and supporters of local peace structures within and beyond GIZ, especially those working on social cohesion in fragile contexts such as Iraq. It is informed by learnings and experiences in Iraq and findings from a literature review.

The **GIZ Transitional Development Assistance (TDA) project “Strengthening resilience in dealing with crises and conflicts in Ninewa, Iraq (SRN)”**, commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), aims to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable populations through the construction and rehabilitation of basic public social infrastructure, livelihood activities and peacebuilding measures. GIZ SRN specifically aims to support locally driven, needs-based, inclusive and participatory peacebuilding processes in order to strengthen social cohesion in Ninewa. It does this by supporting the capacity, impact and sustainability of local peace structures.

In cooperation with IBF Consulting and Peace Paradigms Organization (PPO), GIZ SRN has established and supported five working groups in the project districts of Hamdaniya, Mosul, Tel Afar, Tel Keif and Sinjar. The **District Working Groups (DWGs)** foster social cohesion in their communities by helping prevent and resolve local conflicts and tensions. Work with these working groups forms the core of the project and provides the basis for the strategic direction and conflict-sensitive implementation of other measures. It helps identify livelihoods activities and construction measures, and strengthens local stakeholders in the participatory selection of beneficiaries and the planning of development measures. Experience shows that this approach promotes trust and a common understanding, as well as joint learning for the project and local stakeholders. It also creates synergies and coherence among the project components and increases its overall impact.

This document outlines this approach to facilitating conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes that are led by local stakeholders. In contrast to the more conventional and widespread approach in Iraq, the project has not sought to work through a committee but more flexibly with the civic capacities and governance structures that are already in place.

The aim of this approach is to create a **cooperative network that harnesses the comparative advantages of a diverse range of key actors**. These actors possess the capacities, resources and influence to engage in complex, sensitive and needs-based conflict resolution. Contrary to the structure-building approach, the focus is on providing key actors with the tools they need to carry out their own conflict resolution and problem-solving processes and effectively coordinate or negotiate with counterparts in achieving their goals. This makes the approach much more flexible and independent of fragile government structures. It is better rooted in local governance capacities and local peace activism. The flexibility of the approach also has advantages in terms of adapting to changing dynamics and new conflict scenarios in fragile contexts. Through regular conflict analysis, stakeholder mapping, needs assessments and community consultations, support for the DWGs is grounded in relevant, timely and practical considerations and continually informs project activities and strategic direction.

By **supporting a process rather than a structure**, this approach ultimately aims to establish a new way of cooperating, one that **reinforces the capacities of local stakeholders in dealing with conflicts, where they learn by doing over a period of years**. Instead of

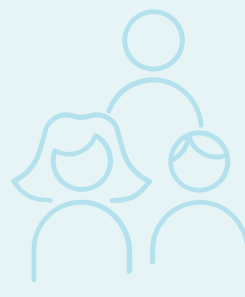
relying on government-selected and top-down appointed committees, the project has brought together a diverse set of formal and informal actors and supported them in collectively working towards common objectives. These actors include administrative officials, governing and security actors, and tribal, religious and civic leaders. This not only helps to engage communities in addressing concerns and grievances but also builds trust and strengthens relationships between these actors and their constituencies. In this way, stakeholders help strengthen social cohesion in their local communities. Support for the DWGs is therefore not solely focused on organisational or capacity development. The main priority is to support key stakeholders in resolving conflicts based on their own priorities and means, which helps enhance problem-solving processes.

This document outlines the approach in more detail. The first section provides a brief overview of social cohesion as a concept and its relevance for development cooperation. The following section describes social cohesion in Iraq and the approaches used to support local peace structures in improving social cohesion. The third section outlines the approach of the GIZ SRN project using guiding questions and includes best practices and practical examples. The final section provides a summary on the strengths and weaknesses, and gives recommendations for applying the approach in similar fragile contexts.



*District working group members engaging during one exchange workshop.*

# Strengthening social cohesion in Iraq



## 1.1 Overview of social cohesion

Social cohesion is characterised by close social relations between and within groups (horizontal cohesion), a sense of belonging to the community, a strong focus on the common good, and legitimate and positive state–society relations (vertical cohesion). This extends not only to formal national and sub-national government actors and institutions, but also to government processes, such as service delivery, security provision, economic policies, elections and legislative deliberations. Social cohesion strengthens the resilience of groups to violent conflicts while also reducing violence and promoting reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Social cohesion between groups is reflected in patterns of behaviour, attitudes and social norms with respect to trust, sense of belonging, willingness to participate and acceptance of diversity.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of social cohesion is therefore not only about trust, but also a sense of collective identity, belonging, inclusion and acceptance of social and political diversity. In what ways, then, can these aspects – and social cohesion in general – be strengthened in countries emerging from war? Long-term sustained efforts are needed to address structural factors as well as intra-group and inter-group grievances. The development of social cohesion is a complex and intergenerational process. Development cooperation can therefore only contribute to this process by helping create the necessary conditions. The added value of development cooperation to peace and social cohesion lies in medium- and long-term structure-building measures that strengthen state–society relations, along with crisis prevention and peacebuilding. By building the capacity of people and local structures and participatory community-based processes that promote ownership, structure-building transitional development assistance contributes to crisis prevention and peacebuilding.

## 2.1 Social Cohesion in Iraq and Ninewa Governorate

**Social cohesion in Iraq** has been severely strained due to structural factors and various cycles of conflict over the past decades. The US invasion of Iraq, which overthrew the Baath Regime in 2003, and the subsequent violence – especially the 2006-2008 civil war – killed thousands, displaced millions and helped magnify sectarian divisions between Shia and Sunni communities. Meanwhile, the de-Baathification policies generated feelings of marginalisation among parts of the Sunni community and created a breeding ground for anti-US insurgent groups and extremist movements to expand their support base, including the precursor to the ‘Islamic State’. The rise of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) in 2014 severely impacted social cohesion in Iraq. The terrorist organisation carried out violent atrocities, further rupturing Iraq’s social fabric and leading to devastating consequences for minority communities. The liberation struggles triggered a fragmentation of security, and the high number of mobilised forces, including the PMU (Popular Mobilization Forces), with conflicting affiliations and agendas, presented further challenges for stability.

The country’s post-2003 political system *Muhasasa* based on sectarian power sharing between the main ethno-religious groups – Sunni and Shia Arabs and Kurds – produced an identity- and elite-based system. This resulted in ineffective governance and marginalised the country’s minority groups, including the Christian and Ezidi communities. While the consociational democratic system established was meant to foster inclusion and promote inter-communal alliances,

<sup>1</sup> German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ): Building peace. Strengthening resilience: The contribution of transitional development assistance to peaceful and inclusive communities. 2021.

in reality it had the opposite impact. Parochial identities came to define politics and access to state resources, and ethno-sectarian elites competed for the capture of state institutions. Once in control, they diverted state resources to narrow support bases. The capture of state institutions by political parties led to poor governance throughout Iraq, catalysing protest movements – the largest in October 2019. These movements rallied against corruption and the inability of the state to provide society's basic needs. Rather than generating trust, cooperation and good governance outcomes, the post-2003 system mainly produced zero-sum, exclusionary processes and ineffective governance. As a consequence, mistrust between communities and between social groups and the state deepened post-2003.

Historically, **Ninewa Governorate**, located in northern Iraq, has been known for its heterogeneous character and its rich heritage, which has fostered a peaceful coexistence among various ethno-religious groups. However, as a result of the violent events and conflicting political interests in recent years, this peaceful coexistence and the strong social ties have been challenged. Social cohesion in Ninewa continues to be affected by the aftermath of the occupation by the terrorist organisation Islamic State (ISIS) and the subsequent liberation struggles. The main challenges, such as areas that have been destroyed or only partially rebuilt and a lack of essential public services, are further intensified by ineffective governing institutions. The local administrative structures largely lack the resources or are incapable of meeting most of the needs of the population. Former economic structures which provided the basis for livelihoods and income generation have been destroyed by the consequences of the conflict and have left people, especially the young generation, with no future prospects. A common refrain from citizens of the governorate is that it is often underserved by government actors. While capacity and resource constraints are a factor, there is a general feeling that this neglect is due in part to Ninewa's diverse demographic composition. This is further exacerbated by the disputed territories issue: several territories in Ninewa are claimed by the Federal Government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

Intra- and intercommunity tensions have also increased in the post-ISIS period. The atrocities committed by ISIS not only heightened tensions between Sunni Arab and other communities but further tensions also erupted due to shifting conflict dynamics. Ethno-religious minorities were the target of brutal violence that led to the displacement of whole communities, particularly in Sinjar and the Ninewa Plains. The return of families with perceived affiliation to ISIS poses a major challenge, with many still facing social barriers to returning; they fear revenge or discrimination, or are even prevented from returning to their communities. The province's communities have lost a great deal of trust in both the GoI and the Kurdistan Regional Government following their failure to protect people from ISIS's initial onslaught and their inability to rehabilitate and develop their communities in the post-ISIS period. Mutual distrust and fear of renewed attacks are leading to increasing geographical segregation and fragmentation of the population groups and have resulted in many communities taking security into their own hands. A diverse range of minority forces have been mobilised along ethnic, sectarian and political lines. The recently increased number of returnees to their areas of origin requires greater attention. More efforts are needed in preventing the escalation of violence, particularly considering the lack of services and opportunities, economic hardship and deep-rooted tensions among the population in the aftermath of ISIS.

## 2.2 Previous efforts and experience of strengthening social cohesion in Iraq

International and national organisations tried to improve social cohesion in the wake of the conflict with ISIS, focusing on both the national and community level and aiming at improving inter-community (horizontal social cohesion) and community–government relationships (vertical social cohesion).

Many local peace structures (LPS) emerged as part of international or government support. With technical and material support from international organisations, key government institutions began to focus on local level dynamics and the need to address security, social,



economic and political tensions that were threatening both IDP return dynamics and stabilisation efforts in areas cleared of ISIS. Many of these issues were idiosyncratic to the dynamics of these territories and therefore required community-specific solutions supported by national and sub-national governing authorities. Several types of local peace structures, such as Local Peace Committees (LPCs), emerged with support from international and national organisations to implement small scale peace initiatives or prioritise the development needs of their communities.

These structures are comprised of actors that promote positive change and help prevent and resolve local conflicts and tensions in their communities. Examples include formal, informal or hybrid structures such as Local Peace Committees or Community Dialogue Committees. Support provided to these committees mainly focused on the structures themselves – enhancing their organisational development and improving their skills via training and learning workshops – as opposed to supporting their ability to engage in peace-building and problem-solving processes.

The main challenges affecting and impairing the impact of these committees were lack of governmental support over time, confusion about their mandate and a risk of political instrumentalisation of their agenda and work. This resulted in a variety of committees being established, changed and dismantled, either due to political interference or exhausted funds. Furthermore, many committees lacked the ability and capacities to engage in and solve complex problems, and had shortcomings regarding representation and inclusivity. It is important to note that both the appointment of Local Peace Committees and the selection of their members was often done in a top-down manner by national government entities, ignoring community inputs and often excluding important official stakeholders. In this way, despite having a diverse membership many committees lacked the legitimacy to play a meaningful role. Consequently, this often resulted in no continuity, little back-up from the communities, weak commitment from official actors, little coherence and ownership, and the withdrawal of governmental support. The approach has therefore been relatively unsustainable.

*The members of the different working groups tell each other about their successes and learn from their challenges.*



# GIZ SRN approach to strengthening social cohesion in Ninewa, Iraq

## 3.1 Overview

Based on the main learnings from past experiences and challenges, the GIZ SRN project designed a different approach for engaging with local peace structures. Instead of creating another committee or working with the existing committees with the above-mentioned shortcomings, the project decided to bring together a variety of actors from existing governance, security, religious structures and problem-solving resources, as well as other civic actors, based on their mandate, authority or influence in their community.

This approach also helps overcome the bottlenecks that can be experienced when working with only one governmental partner. Although working with one actor provides a key entry point for ownership to be established through assistance projects, it can sometimes impact the effectiveness or progress of the project, especially when the government partner lacks the required resources, skills and decision-making powers needed to advance the implementation of projects. Projects may also experience frequent changes in governmental

partners due to volatile political dynamics, often relying on personal relationships rather than institutions. Furthermore, in contexts of weak or fragile governance, the emerging power vacuum is often filled by non-state actors who are less dependent on institutional hierarchies or an official chain of command. The multi-actor approach outlined in this example helps to overcome these dilemmas as the emphasis is on engagement with a wide array of sub-national actors who have the required influence, legitimacy and abilities to carry out problem-solving and conflict resolution activities. This mitigates the challenges associated with partnering with only one government actor and not to be captive to delays, or susceptible to political influence and change.

This chapter is about our support for and engagement with the **District Working Groups (DWGs)**. The focus of our approach is less on structure-building and more on **facilitating the process through which the capacities of local stakeholders are strengthened** so

that they are better able to resolve conflict drivers in their communities. The approach targets a pool of stakeholders comprised of administrative officials and governmental representatives, security actors, tribal and religious leaders, civil society actors, activists, journalists, academics and representatives of various marginalised groups. The individual contribution of each stakeholder can be their decision-making authority, their legitimacy and representativeness



*Social activists from Mosul share their views on local conflicts.*

with respect to the community, and access or outreach to community groups or networks. The aim is to create an agile and dynamic cooperation network at district level, based on the comparative advantages of a diverse range of actors. By enabling a process rather than a structure, this approach seeks to establish a **new way of cooperating among existing stakeholders who have the capacities, resources and influence to engage in complex and (politically) sensitive conflict resolution**. This will ultimately strengthen both vertical and horizontal social cohesion. Conflicts addressed include, for example, those around return and reintegration of IDPs, land disputes, issues in service delivery, victim compensation, and abuse by security actors.

### 3.2 Our guiding principles

Throughout our experience, we followed **three main principles**. These are important in ensuring effective support for and work with the DWGs.

**1 Participatory approach throughout the implementation of the project.** A participatory decision-making approach should be used, whereby we

and the people we are supporting reach consensus on key decisions related to the assistance provided and the work implemented by the working group. It is important to note that the assistance modality is in reality more of a learning exchange and joint implementation of activities. The primacy of local knowledge over top-down input is essential to participatory decision-making. To help nurture this type of relationship, it is vital that clear, frequent and effective ways of communication be established. For example, a meeting can be held on a bi-annual basis to review progress and address decisions that need to be made. It also requires “people management”, which is key for building trusting relationships and joint learning; there is a need to engage working group members on a personal level as cooperation partners, as opposed to just seeing them as mere beneficiaries of a project. This collaborative approach requires patience and careful attention to sensitivities, but it also creates trust and confidence between us and the people we are aiming to support.

**2 Local expertise.** Local facilitators play a crucial role as the main interlocutors on the ground, supporting and mentoring the DWGs. Using local

### Focus activities of the District Working Groups (DWGs)

District Working Group	Thematic focus / Objective
Mosul	Supporting return and reintegration of families with perceived affiliation to ISIS (FPAs) in South Mosul.
Sinjar	Rebuilding trust between Ezidi and Arab communities in Sinjar.
Tel Keif	Addressing the administrative overlap in public service provision between Tel Keif and Mosul districts.
Tel Afar	Reducing community tensions by strengthening participatory mechanisms between the community and local administration in order to respond to citizens' needs and priorities.
Hamdaniya	Addressing the issue of marginalisation of some groups within the University of Hamdaniya in order to achieve community cohesion and a positive environment that encourages openness and integration.

facilitators who are familiar with the area of the working group and who can act as mentors and technical advisors to them is also an important principle from our experience. Each of the working groups had facilitators who knew the local context and actors as well as the associated sensitivities on how to work with the various stakeholders in order to make the DWGs effective. Facilitators should have conflict mediation expertise and extensive knowledge of the areas and stakeholders addressed by the working group. They should be involved in the overall approach to supporting the DWGs, including coaching and mentoring the DWGs on relevant topics, such as dialogue facilitation, conflict transformation, participatory methods and community outreach. They should also help monitor, evaluate and assess the development and impact of the project. International trainers and experts can be brought in on a case-by-case basis in order to tap international expertise and train the working groups on specific technical topics.

Our work relies on neutral, tailored conflict analyses, which are developed with the support and involvement of our target communities. The facilitators should also be involved in the conflict analysis phase; they can help ensure that the questions addressed are appropriate to the context and mindful of local sensitivities.

### 3 Extensive and flexible commitment.

Supporting conflict resolution and problem-solving processes through local stakeholders requires an extensive commitment if these processes are to function independently and effectively. This kind of commitment helps us and our partners at the local level set strategic short, medium and long-term goals over the course of the project. It also enables us to discuss, together with our target group, how our efforts can be impactful and sustainable. Furthermore, it allows the DWGs to develop ownership over the implementation of their activities.

*The Tel Keif working groups invites PWDs to hear and discuss their needs.*



An extensive commitment must be underpinned by flexible and longer-term funding. Flexibility in terms of capacity development assistance and activities is a key requirement. We need to continually adapt to the changing context. This means that funding needs for specific types of assistance and project activities may not be clear in advance and may often arise as a result of the changing conflict environment. Given this reality, financing approaches and implementation instruments for supporting local peace structures need to be highly flexible if they are to be effective. Our experience shows that semi-direct implementation through comprehensive service contracts is the most suitable implementation modality for this case. It enables the flexibility and adaptive management required for working with local peace structures in a fragile context on a long-term basis. This implementation modality also allows for direct interlinkages with other project components or fields of action to ensure an integrated approach as part of the TDA logic.

## 3.2 Best Practices and Lessons Learned

The following sections provide practical examples that can serve as inspiration for how to strengthen social cohesion by working with local stakeholders through DWGs. The chapter is structured according to a number of guiding questions on conflict analysis, inception and process. The different sections also include recommendations and practical examples of effective and sustainable ways of working.

### 3.2.1 Conflict analysis: Design and use

#### **Why was a participatory conflict analysis an essential preparatory step?**

The GIZ SRN project conducts conflict analyses in each of the five districts in Ninewa targeted for support (Mosul, Hamdaniya, Tel Keif, Sinjar and Tel Afar) on a regular basis (every six months).

Analysing the conflict context was the first step in identifying and supporting the DWG and its members. The findings benefitted both the DWGs and the overall GIZ SRN project, including the other two

project components construction and livelihoods. They also provided the DWGs with a common and nuanced understanding of the conflict environment, dispelling any misconceptions or differing interpretations of the conflict dynamics and shedding light on hidden or unseen aspects of the conflict. This, in turn, allowed the stakeholders to focus on conflict-sensitive entry points for addressing the issues highlighted by the analysis. The findings are shared with other projects and organisations to inform their work in peacebuilding and social cohesion in Ninewa Governorate.

#### **What did the conflict analysis include?**

The conflict analysis design included both a literature review and primary research activities that focused on:

- Describing an area's history with conflict;
- Identifying structural and proximate drivers of conflict;
- Establishing the main stakeholders in the conflict, including their interests and objectives (including enablers and spoilers), identifying the actors needed to resolve the drivers of conflict and overall stakeholder dynamics, including linkages between local and national actors;
- Identifying existing local peace structures and their members, as well as agreements and/or local non-violent dispute resolution mechanisms.

#### **What was the methodology and data collection process for participatory conflict analysis?**

In the biannual conflict analysis, primary data collection activities took a mixed-methods approach, comprising key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) and public perception surveys, where possible. The data collection targeted not only key decision-makers but also segments of the wider community, and integrated the perspectives of marginalised and underrepresented groups.

The data relied predominantly on subjective perspectives and assessments of KIs and survey respondents and cannot be generalised per se. KIIs were preferred for gathering sensitive information. To ensure anonymity, we did not disclose the identities of the KIs in each district. However, a general summary of the profiles of the KIs was included at the beginning of each report.

For the survey, we used a snowball sampling technique due to limited resources and a lack of responsiveness in the case of random sampling. The aim was not to generalise the findings but to gain insights into specific issues that were of interest for the project and the working groups, especially community perceptions of the main concerns currently in the district.

Mixed-gender FGDs were conducted in each sub-district, with one female-only FGD in each district. When reaching out to community members of marginalised or underrepresented groups, such as women, it was important to create a safe space. This included conducting KIIs or FGDs with women using a female interviewer or facilitator and providing additional explanation or travel allowance to a male member of the household to ensure that female participation was possible.

#### **How did we define the geographical focus?**

Local peace structures can operate at varying scales, across all levels of governance (i.e. national, sub-national and local levels). The level of analysis that has proven most helpful from this experience has been the sub-district level. This means that the conflict analysis is hyperlocal, as it is looking at the governing system's smallest administrative unit. The reason for targeting this level is simple: experience has shown that imple-

menting a methodology that samples the district or a higher-level misses key localised drivers of conflict, influential stakeholders at the local level and community grievances, and it overlooks the perspectives of marginalised groups.

Ultimately, the scale of operation should be based on the conflict analysis findings and relevant to the problems that the structure will address. As many issues in Iraq require district level authority, GIZ SRN decided to establish the working groups at district level, with the ability to also target conflicts only prevalent in specific sub-districts.

#### **Why was it important to conduct regular conflict analysis?**

To ensure that the project was based on an up-to-date, close and truthful understanding of the tensions and drivers of local conflicts, it was important to conduct this exercise on a regular basis. The conflict analysis exercise was repeated every six months, with a tailored questionnaire based on the discussions and priorities of the DWGs and the project context. Data collection included dedicated case studies in each district, in relation to the DWG initiatives. This provided a detailed picture and in-depth information on return

*Community consultation with community leaders and Mukhtars.*





and reintegration dynamics in specific target areas, community perceptions about the October 2021 parliamentary elections, community relationships between specific groups (Ezidi–Muslim in Sinjar, Shia–Sunni in Tel Afar) and new security arrangements in specific districts.

The regular analysis also enabled changes and constants in conflict dynamics and priorities to be tracked throughout the life of the project, and activities could be redesigned and tailored to meet community needs and adapt to changes in the conflict.

#### **How many resources and steps were involved in the conflict analysis?**

The main research activities for each round of conflict analysis were KIIs and FGDs, targeting the sub-districts in each district. In terms of staff, this required training for enumerators of the perception survey and facilitators of the KIIs and FGDs. Sufficient preparation time had to be allocated to developing the questionnaire, conducting the interviews and planning and facilitating the FGDs. Logistical support for the FGDs in each sub-district also had to be provided by the project. Analysing the data and compiling the report required additional resources. Baseline and endline surveys were also carried out in each district to complement the findings from the qualitative approach. While it is true that a mixed-methods and hyperlocal conflict analysis approach can be resource-intensive in terms of staff, time and finances, such costs are offset by its benefits. These benefits were experienced first-

hand through the systemic conflict analysis approach, and they included regular use of updated information in meetings with target groups, updates on changes in the context and important stakeholders, and a detailed picture of community relationships and dynamics.

How were the findings discussed and validated? Conflict analysis findings were discussed with the DWGs in order to ground them in the existing perspectives and generate buy-in and common understanding among the different stakeholders. This was especially key as members came from different backgrounds and communities and did not always agree on what was driving conflict in their areas. Discussion sessions were held with each DWG about the conflict analysis findings so that they could provide feedback and validate the results. Combined with the fact that some of the DWG members were interviewed as part of the research, this discussion helped generate buy-in for the findings, in addition to getting all stakeholders on the same page about what is happening in their communities.

#### **How were the findings used to prioritise and inform the objectives?**

The findings were used as part of a structured process to identify issues that the DWGs could work on, as well as the actions needed to address those issues. The conflict analysis played a vital role in helping the members not only identify the drivers of conflict that could realistically be addressed but also practical activities that they could carry out as a group. The analysis also

highlighted issues prevalent in the conflict environment that the local stakeholders had little experience with. Capacity support for the DWG on those issues therefore needed to be designed and implemented.

The conflict analysis findings were used to help inform a strategic planning session with each working group. At these sessions, the findings were presented to the members to get their views and look at how they compared to their own understanding of what was happening in their communities. This was done in order to generate buy-in from the members and fill any gaps that the findings may have missed. In the strategic planning meetings, the DWGs also identified what they could work on, with members agreeing on priorities that would be feasible and in line with their own capacities. Rather than selecting the most pressing issue or a structural driver of conflict, which might be too sensitive or beyond the capacities or scope of influence of the stakeholders, members gravitated towards problems that were pressing but also achievable. Sometimes that meant that important topics, which required higher levels of involvement, could not be addressed as part of that work.

#### **How was the conflict analysis further utilised during implementation?**

The conflict analysis process was used to help increase the capacity and legitimacy of the DWGs and their work. Over the course of the project, there was a

gradual transfer of ownership of key research activities to the DWGs. The DWGs developed capacities for the conflict-sensitive handling of problems through a mentored learning-by-doing approach. In this way, over time, they went from receivers of conflict analysis information to owners of key conflict analysis activities, such as organising validation sessions and identifying key actors to interview as part of the research. In addition, DWG members were involved in data collection for the fifth conflict analysis. They identified participants and venues according to previously agreed criteria for the FGDs, invited the community members and facilitated the discussions, including note-taking and reporting. Prior to this, DWG members were given orientation sessions tailored to the research questions, as well as a refresher on conducting field data collection and guidance on note-taking and reporting. This provided an excellent opportunity for them to learn to identify and analyse key drivers of conflict in their areas. It also strengthened their practical skills with a view to preparing and conducting targeted outreach sessions on their own in the future. Ultimately, this increased their overall ownership of the process and the legitimacy of the conflict analysis findings, which helped ensure a more sustainable approach to addressing conflict. This involvement also increased their own legitimacy and helped build trust through their proximity to the communities, which contributed to strengthening social cohesion at a vertical level.

*Community consultation to exchange with youth on their interests and needs.*





### 3.2.2 The inception: Assembling the DWGs

#### How did we ensure diversity and representativeness?

Local peace structures should be diverse in composition and include a wide range of actors that accurately represent and are seen as legitimate by the communities in which the structures operate. In Iraq, diversity means including members from the different ethno-religious groups and vulnerable or under-represented demographic groups (e.g. women and youth). It also means that local level authorities – tribal, religious, civic and administrative – need to be brought into the structure, keeping in mind political affiliations and leanings.

Representation is a related concept and is about the stakeholders engaged having community legitimacy. This may be rooted in their status as local civic, tribal, religious and administrative leaders or by other means, such as that they are backed by external political actors. The point is that members must not only reflect the population but also have the backing and support of the communities they serve.

Having accounted for ethno-religious diversity, the membership also needs to reflect political affiliations. Although local peace structures should strive to be non-political, the reality is that politics and political affiliations can cast a shadow over their work and cannot be ignored. In the case of the Mosul DWG, for example, members include a representative from the Governor's Office, the district commissioner, the heads of the district's security coordination unit, academics, journalists, tribal leaders and civil society activists. Such a diverse set of members is a boon for the group, as each of its members brings specific expertise and has influence over different issues and access to different segments in society. The group's work should therefore leverage the varying capacities of its members when implementing projects in order to maximise its overall impact. For example, in Hamdaniya district, membership of the DWG needed to reflect the heterogeneous population of the district, which is comprised mainly of Christians, Shabaks and Sunni Arabs, and includes smaller communities, such as the Ezidis. To avoid the work being politically instrumentalised, it was important that the working group did not contain overt or hardline political actors. When selecting the stakeholders, it was essential to ensure that, as a minimum, mem-



bers were not considered to have any strong political affiliation, or if they did, that there were also members who did not have this affiliation to show that the structure's composition was balanced. In Hamdaniya, local administrative actors have been associated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), given the party's influence over the district since 2003. In this case, this meant that even if ethno-religious communities were properly represented, some of the other members selected needed to be independent of this party affiliation.

#### How did we deal with the dilemma of inclusivity at the onset?

The way inclusion is achieved may not be in keeping with our ideal scenario. This has to be accounted for in other ways. The types of members included in local peace structures may be restricted in contexts where traditional norms are dominant, such as Iraq. This may mean that including certain vulnerable groups, like women and youth, to the same extent as traditional leaders – religious, tribal and political – may not be possible, at least in the short-term. While this is not ideal, the reality is that challenging these norms may engender more harm in the short-term and derail the local peace structure from achieving its stated objective of mitigating conflict and solving complex problems. We broadened inclusivity in such situations by finding other ways to engage vulnerable groups. This included having them be part of the conflict analysis phase – both as researchers and as target groups to be interviewed – and including them in relevant activities conducted by the DWGs, like dialogues and communi-

ty consultations. Over time, as trust is built between us and the target group, it is possible to expand membership to other groups.

### **What was the profile of the members and their scope of work?**

In general, the work of the DWGs corresponded to their capacities and composition and was guided by the findings of the conflict analysis. This included conflict resolution and resolving administrative and governance issues. As a result, their composition was hybrid in nature: they included influential formal and informal authorities as well as influential civic actors who had the skills, influence and resources to tackle such issues. This not only provided the groups with the capacities needed to address conflict drivers and enhance social cohesion, it also helped elevate community representation and legitimacy given the inclusion of informal and civic entities. It also enabled more vertical and horizontal relationships to be established throughout the work, thereby strengthening relationships among key actors or governmental authorities. The hybrid composition allowed the DWGs to solve problems more effectively while at the same time improving the relationships among key actors. An LPS comprised only of civic actors would likely have been inhibited in solving problems, especially regarding issues that were tied to administrative power and required direct connections to power holders in governmental authorities.

### **How did we ensure a proper selection process?**

To ensure that membership was diverse and representative, a membership selection process was put in place that was grounded in findings from the conflict analysis and community validation. The conflict analysis provided the basis for a separate stakeholder

mapping exercise of potential members with clout and community support. These findings were then validated through community consultations and feedback sessions from national and international organisations familiar with the political and social landscape in the targeted areas. The validation sessions aimed to ensure that the individuals identified were politically and socially accepted by communities (i.e. no criminal record, no affiliation with any extremist group or unwelcome political party etc.) and representative of the communities they served. The sessions also provided an understanding of the level of influence of the stakeholders in their areas. It is important to keep in mind that the validation exercise is extremely sensitive as it can be misconstrued as an intelligence gathering exercise, perceived as a means of politically supporting certain actors over others, or can raise expectations that identified members will receive some kind of support. Those conducting the validation sessions therefore need to ensure questions are asked in a conflict-sensitive way and that the objective of the validation session is clear to everyone involved.

### **Why was strategic planning important for laying the groundwork and setting standards?**

The objective of the DWGs was to effectively plan, design and manage their activities with the aim of achieving their priorities, based on neutral conflict analysis. Within their scope of work, they had to identify what objectives and outcomes were feasible given their capacities and sphere of influence. The overall aim was to improve the capacity of local actors to produce their own workplans, and clearly and convincingly articulate their vision, based on evidence, for strengthening social cohesion in their communities. Strategic planning support also included the development of a code



*Facilitator explaining the group session to the working group members.*



*Group session during one of the exchange workshops.*

of conduct, which provided clarity to the members on their expected roles, responsibilities and behaviour. Taken together, the code of conduct and identification of priorities helped transform the working group from an entity with disparate members into one operating as a cohesive unit with a common understanding of its mission and objectives. In addition, concrete and measurable results for the objective were developed together with the DWGs in order to monitor progress. It was important to carry out this exercise jointly to ensure that the indicators were relevant and manageable. Indicators were formulated in a way that identified changes in knowledge, the application of skills and organisational development. These types of indicators provided the members and the project with a better understanding of the areas where progress was being made and where more support was needed.

### 3.2.3 The process: Working with the DWGs

#### **What kind of capacity development assistance was needed?**

Flexible and continuous capacity development assistance was provided, with less intensity towards the end of the project in order to ensure the DWGs could effectively work on the thematic issues they had prioritised. The aim was to provide the stakeholders with the tools

to initiate and advance their own conflict resolution or problem-solving processes.

Each working group was assessed in terms of its strengths and weaknesses in order to clarify the level of expertise in the thematic areas identified. Organisational and thematic areas were identified that needed addressing as a priority in order for the working group to effectively implement its initiative and reach its objectives. Where gaps in knowledge were highlighted, capacity assistance was planned specifically in those areas. Overall, capacity development measures were tailored to the priorities identified and were not limited to trainings and workshops on generic topics. The experience of working together and peer exchange among the members and different stakeholders and community segments was key to the learning process. Due to the different conflict contexts and objectives, each of the five DWGs had specific needs and challenges. This necessitated a tailored approach to assisting each DWG via workshops, exchange, peer-learning, coaching and mentoring. Depending on the issue each working group focused on, capacity development support differed in terms of technical topics (conflict management, dialogue and negotiation, rehabilitation and reintegration) and procedural topics (effective communication, design and implementation of initiatives, needs assessment, advocacy campaigns). However, all DWGs needed to learn how to do community outreach in a conflict-sensitive way, using a do-no-harm and

*Presentation by one working group member sharing lessons learned and the results of their initiative.*



inclusive approach. Special trainings on effective communication and presentation skills and leadership were also provided to the female members on request.

### **How did we keep all members engaged?**

In the DWGs, it was important to ensure that there were no hierarchies among members and that they communicated with one another. Encouraging active participation and dynamic exchange would help prevent the group from becoming desultory and aimless. To ensure this, regularly scheduled meetings with the members were needed in addition to activity-specific meetings. Group chats on messaging apps were also set up, providing an easy way to keep communication among all the members flowing, especially when developments in the community arose. Mentoring involved people management, especially by the facilitators dedicated to the groups.

In a self-assessment, DWG members said that these frequent interactions were a key factor in helping them to stay engaged throughout the process, to maintain momentum and keep following up on implementation steps.

### **How did we balance power dynamics and different roles in the group?**

In the overall process, it was important to leverage the skill sets and capacities of the stakeholders engaged and work towards a balanced power dynamic within the working group. No actor should dominate or unduly influence the work and all members should have an equal and important role to play in the process.

In the DWGs, a key concern was that members who were formal governing actors might see the group as an entity that was subordinate to their official office. The members of the DWGs included a mix of influential formal and informal actors, who existed in a social

hierarchy. To prevent powerful actors from dominating the group, we actively involved other stakeholders in the discussions and work who might otherwise remain passive due to the dominant member. Furthermore, we asked different members to play complementary roles in their work or be responsible for complementary tasks. This required all members to be active but in different ways, leveraging the different capacities and strengths they brought to the group.

### **How did we keep members motivated to stay involved in the long term?**

In the early phase, it was important to focus only on conflict issues that the members had the capacities to solve. A quick win for the working group increased the confidence and motivation of the members, showed them that they could make a difference, and encouraged them to take greater responsibility for the work of the group. By working on more straightforward problems to begin with, the stakeholders were able to grow and sharpen their skillset, and this gave them the understanding needed to tackle more complex issues over time.

The work of the Tel Keif DWG is a good example. There was an administrative overlap which was impacting electricity provision in eight villages. Solving this issue catalysed the members to take on more responsibilities and address administrative overlaps in all sectors across the Mosul and Tel Keif districts.

### **How did we ensure that initiatives were conducted in an inclusive and participatory way?**

It was important that local peace structures seek conflict solutions that encouraged inclusion and were grounded in human rights and the rule of law. The aim was to showcase the importance of including all groups in the work, including women, youth and other under-represented groups.

Mosul DWG, for example, engaged in a dialogue process in South Mosul in order to facilitate the return of families with perceived ISIS affiliation. After negotiations with tribal figures, the DWG decided to involve marginalised groups during a planning and design session. The DWG facilitated interactions between the tribal leaders and IDPs in camp in order to ensure that negative resolution practices to tribal disputes were not used by local stakeholders. The meetings centred around understanding the concerns of each internally displaced family and the reasons why they did not want to return to their homes. This information was then used to engage with families that had been directly victimised by ISIS in order to understand what needed to happen for them to accept the return of the IDPs. This type of engagement differed from previous, less participatory approaches which had engaged with secondary actors on the issue of return. It made the overall process more inclusive and responsive to the actual needs of all communities.

Another example comes from Tel Afar, where the DWG focused on reducing community tensions by strengthening participatory mechanisms between the community and the local government. It set up a participatory budget planning process to reflect the needs and priorities of the citizens in the government budget and foster inclusive decision-making in the provision of public services. The DWG created a local consultation mechanism that gathered the views of communities on what services and projects need funding in their communities. This information was then linked to the local authority budgeting process by the DWG, making the official process more informed and responsive to the needs of the district's citizens.

### **Why was community engagement key in the whole process?**

To be sensitive to and inclusive of different perspectives, the DWG activities needed to be grounded in community engagement and validation. This also provided them with the necessary legitimacy. Community engagement activities were therefore integrated into the work of the DWGs. These activities included:

- Community validation and feedback sessions on conflict analysis findings. These helped ensure buy-in for the findings, as well as strengthening the overall analysis.
- Consultations with communities on stakeholder selection. This ensured that the stakeholders who were chosen for the working group had community backing. It also enhanced community representation and ownership over the group.
- Consultations with communities on the priority issues chosen by the working group. This helped enhance community ownership over the work and ensured the issues selected were relevant concerns for communities.
- Community consultations in order to review the progress made by the DWGs. This was important because it ensured that the public was aware of the progress made. It also helped manage public expectations about what could be achieved and when.

### **Why was peer learning and exchange important throughout the process?**

Exchange among the working groups promoted peer learning and increased opportunities for collaboration across different districts. At biannual workshops, all five DWGs were brought together to exchange on their successes and challenges, and to reflect on their organisational set up, team dynamics and vision for moving forward during and beyond the period of external support. We went through the project's methodology with the members in order to enhance their understanding of how to take an active role in addressing local tensions or conflicts in a needs-based, conflict-sensitive, inclusive and transparent manner. This ensured that there was a logical link between the overall methodological framework and the purpose of the individual peace initiatives. These exchanges also allowed members to discuss key milestones towards sustainability. Lastly, the workshops provided an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the overall approach and how the DWGs differed from other local peace structures in Iraq. A common learning experience can also foster cohesion and bring together actors who might not necessarily exchange or engage with one another.

### **How did we gradually transfer responsibility to foster local ownership?**

Significant support was needed at the beginning of the working groups in terms of logistics, operations and project implementation support. But as their capacities developed over time, through trainings, mentoring and learning by doing, they were able to assume (and it was important that they assumed) more responsibility and ownership. The aim was for local stakeholders to eventually take the lead, with external support in the background in the form of technical assistance and advice. This approach is about linking local knowledge with comparative and international best practice. It allows the target group to see how their understanding of the topic and existing skills overlap with comparative best practices and encourages them to contribute to the overall understanding of the topic and to steer activities in the long run with only minimal external support.

For example, the DWG members in Tel Keif reached a stage in their internal and project management development where they independently organised both the internal bi-monthly meetings and the meetings and consultations with government actors.

In Sinjar, the DWG decided to focus on Ezidi–Arab tensions brought about by the recent conflict with ISIS. The project supported the working group in breaking the contentious issues down so that they could be addressed in phases, starting with areas that were less complex and where there was more space to intervene. Once progress had been made, the DWG built on this momentum and scaled up its engagement to include more complex areas. Sinjar DWG eventually took the lead in understanding perspectives on both sides to the conflict, both in the pre-negotiation phase and in the confidence-building measures phase. This included getting buy-in from security and political actors for the mediation process.

Addressing these kinds of issues can make the DWGs more confident in their own ability to manage and resolve conflicts in their communities. This, in turn, makes them less reliant on external actors (such as NGOs and international organisations) for support in the long term, thereby contributing to their sustainability.

### **Facilitating local peace processes**

There are three main tasks that local peace structures can focus on to facilitate local peace processes. The first is laying the groundwork for the local peace process to begin. This can entail individual consultations with the disputing parties in order to better understand their positions, selected trust-building measures to bring parties to the table, and stakeholder analysis to inform the design of the process. Local peace structures can also play a facilitating role in the intra- and inter-party dialogue sessions. Lastly, the LPS could also be tasked with playing a direct mediation role where they engage with each disputing party in order to directly resolve the issues at hand.

The Mosul DWG, for example, worked on the return and reintegration of families with perceived ISIS affiliation in three sub-districts in South Mosul, a sensitive and contentious issue in the post-ISIS period. They conducted dialogues with victims' families, co-facilitated tribal negotiations, advanced compensation claims of victims' families, assembled a delegation of high-level officials to visit their areas for the first time to acknowledge ISIS crimes, and conducted direct mediation and dialogue sessions between the tribal representatives of the host community and the IDP families in camp.

Sinjar DWG worked on repairing the relationship between Sunni Arabs and Ezidis through trust-building activities and direct mediation that focused on transitional and restorative justice at community level. They also conducted dialogues with community leaders and members of Arab and Ezidi villages in Sinjar.

## Governance and public service provision

Governance and service delivery is a core grievance and driver of tensions in many places. Hence, LPS can also play a role in helping resolve governance issues and improving public service delivery, as part of a needs-based and transparent process. The work of local peace structures can focus on coordinating with official governing bodies or local authorities and enhancing the ability of governing institutions to respond to the actual needs of the communities by consulting with all affected communities. This can be done through advocacy activities focused on key service needs and by facilitating exchange and consultations among government officials and community leaders.

Tel Keif DWG focused on addressing two key governance issues causing tension and ineffective service provision: firstly, the administrative overlap between Tel Keif Center and Wana sub-district, which had an adverse impact on electricity provision, depriving citizens of basic services; and secondly, unclear administrative divisions between Tel Keif district and Mosul district. Essentially, these problems are rooted in the disputed status of the district. After a round of data collection, consultations and negotiations, the DWG was able to resolve all issues that affected electricity provision in eight villages and worked with the administrative units in Tel Keif and Mosul to find solutions and clarify their roles and responsibilities. Following the first success, Tel Keif working group also managed to resolve the hardship for approx. 12.000 families affected from the administrative overlap in all sectors. The DWG's efforts not only reduced the time-consuming routine citizens were suffering from but also enabled the families to complete administrative procedures regarding public services locally.

In Tel Afar, the DWG chose to address the division between communities and local authorities (i.e. a trust issue) by working on a topic that matters to all communities: compensation. They also chose to work on the lack of trust for government institutions by focusing on improving governance. The DWG created a local consultation mechanism that gathered the views of communities on what services and projects need funding in their communities, e.g. identifying specific needs to be included in the food security budget of the district. The DWG then linked this information to the local authority budgeting process, resulting in changes in the food security budget and making the official process more informed and responsive to the needs of the district's citizens.



## 4. Conclusion

This approach is based on the main learnings and experiences with the District Working Groups, where the **focus lies on facilitating a process rather than merely structure-building**. It is a flexible mechanism for effectively engaging in local peacebuilding processes and adapting to challenges and changing dynamics in a fragile context. Its strengths lie in thorough and regular conflict analysis and stakeholder mapping, engagement with individual influential stakeholders and existing local resources, and building a sense of joint purpose through working groups with clear problem-solving missions. A sense of responsibility is created through the skills, capacities and resources each actor brings to the group: every person can make a distinct contribution and have positive experiences by joining forces and celebrating successes. This not only motivates people to engage locally in solving issues in their community, but to also grow personally by taking on a leadership role and starting their own change process.

The **main success factors** mentioned by the DWG members themselves are:

- Cooperation among the members themselves
- General interest above personal interest
- Diversity within the groups (different experiences, backgrounds, resources, capacities, etc.)
- Enthusiasm and motivation of the members and the community
- High buy-in from the local administration / local government
- Needs-based initiatives born out of the reality of the context and the communities
- Proper planning and preparation
- Safe spaces and relaxed environments created through extensive community outreach
- Peer support and mutual capacity development

It is important to note that the GIZ SRN project did not follow the usual capacity development approach





but focused rather on providing the stakeholders with the right tools to identify and analyse issues and conflicts in their communities, effectively plan, coordinate and liaise with authorities and decision-makers. In addition, they included the perspectives and needs of the community through consultations and outreach, especially those of underrepresented and marginalised groups. The project stakeholders “learnt by doing” over a period of years. The focus on partnership and fostering ownership among multiple partners was central to the work on the ground.

It is also important to highlight, however, that this form of support requires extensive human and financial resources that go beyond the usual resources for peacebuilding activities of GIZ TDA projects. From the long-term design phase to the tendering and planning process, projects will have to complete a long preparatory phase before being able to start actual implementation. The issues are often sensitive and the political territory is delicate. This requires careful

management and the involvement of the project’s national and international technical advisors. All of this draws on substantial project resources. It is particularly important that service delivery is of high quality for the approach to be effective. But this can only be achieved if financial and staff resources are assured in the long term. Thanks to the large budget the project had at its disposal, measures could be planned with a longer-term objective based on the resources required. In the case of the GIZ SRN project, this was crucial to the overall success of the project.

Work with the DWGs was not only a successful peacebuilding measure in itself but also provided entry points for many other (non-peacebuilding-related) project activities in the other two project components construction and livelihoods. It deepened the project understanding not only of “what we do” but, more importantly, of “how we work” to advance local peacebuilding processes.





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