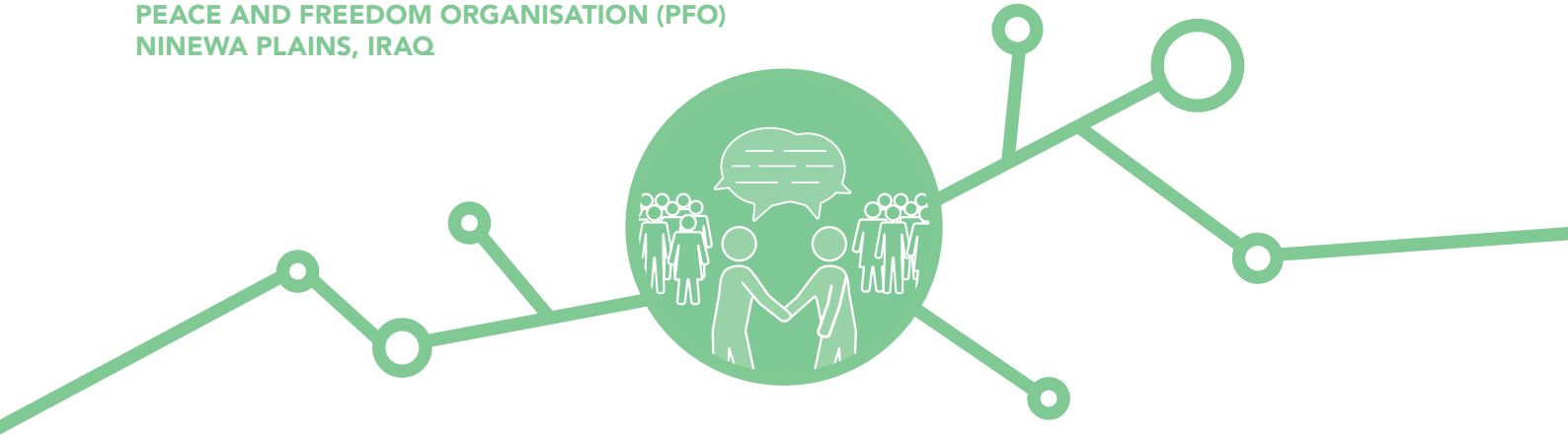


# RECONCILIATION THROUGH STORYTELLING

PEACE AND FREEDOM ORGANISATION (PFO)  
NINEWA PLAINS, IRAQ



## CATEGORIES

- A** Connecting activities & community events
- F** Formats overcoming conflicts & division

## PRESENTER

Nibras Khalil, Programs Manager

## DESCRIPTION

Local Peace Committees (LPCs) were formed by the Iraqi NGO Peace and Freedom Organisation (PFO) following the retaking of Mosul and the Ninewa Plains from IS control in 2017. They are comprised of male and female youth from all ethno-religious groups present in the various cities and work to promote social cohesion, peacebuilding, and reconciliation as people return and work to rebuild their cities and lives. LPCs engage in activities to overcome social divides and advocate for the rights of the communities. Storytelling serves as a key tool for mutual understanding.

## MOTIVATION

LPCs aim to rebuild trust and peace between different ethno-religious groups and build community resilience. It is motivated by the desire of Iraqi society to overcome recent trauma and build a peaceful future where diversity is celebrated.

## PROBLEM ADDRESSED

After being liberated from IS rule fractures surfaced between different ethno-religious groups. One major point of conflict was distrust between those who had remained in the area under IS control (some Sunni Muslims) and those who had fled (minorities and Muslims not supporting IS ideology). The so-called "returnees" accused the "remainees" of having supported IS and thereby contributed to the destruction of their lives and property. Due to the unstable political situation, many areas came under the control of religious militias which caused further division amongst different parts of society.

## MORE DETAILS

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The Ninewa Plains are one of the most diverse areas in Iraq with around 14 different ethno-religious communities, including Christians (Catholic, Orthodox, Chaldean), Yezidis, Muslims (Sunni and Shia, Arab, Turkmen and Kurd) and Kakai. These areas were captured by IS in 2014 and remained under their control for several years. This led to displacement of minorities and those Muslim Sunni communities not sharing IS ideology. After the areas were retaken, the communities returned to destroyed villages and began to rebuild their lives and intercommunal conflicts surfaced in this process. The Iraqi NGO „Peace and Freedom Organisation“ has been working in these communities to establish Local Peace Committees consisting of local volunteers from all ethno-religious groups, largely comprised of male and female youth. These LPCs have the central goal of promoting social cohesion, reconciliation, and peacebuilding in these post-conflict societies. They work to rebuild trust between the communities through organizing joint activities, such as sports championships, clean up campaigns, parent-teacher associations in schools, supporting female empowerment, jointly celebrating religious, and cultural occasions.

One key tool in rebuilding trust between communities is storytelling: the LPCs encourage intercommunal interaction and allow space for different parts of society to tell their own stories. Both those who remained in the area under IS control and those who fled all suffered equally, if differently; raising awareness about this joint struggle helps build empathy and paves the way for reconciliation.

The LPCs have a primary focus on youth because they represent the future of Iraq and are the engine to drive things forward sustainably. LPCs also play a role in advocating for minority rights and representing the wishes of the grass roots to decision-making bodies.

## OUTCOMES

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Peace and Freedom Organisation has established 6 LPCs in 6 different cities, all of which have a distinct ethno-religious composition. Each LPC consists of 30 members. Two LPCs are currently being established and the four existing LPCs have reached 7860 beneficiaries to date (they are still running).

Core achievements can be seen on two levels. On the communal level, interest in LPCs is growing – there are more volunteers than space in the LPCs and even community leaders such as Mukhtars have expressed interest in being on these councils. On the administrative level, local authorities have provided their full support and given necessary permissions for LPCs to advocate with higher level bodies. Also, local authorities have been participating in LPC activities.

The work of the LPCs has spread beyond the governorate of Ninewa: following a Yezidi celebration of the Shia festival Ashura, the LPC in Bashiqa was contacted by Shia Muslims in the south of the country, who wanted to return the gesture by celebrating a Yezidi festival. Further, the LPC of the predominantly Christian city, Qaraqosh, painted the only mosque in the city and as a result, the Muslim youth of Misan in the south of Iraq painted the only Church in their city.

## LESSONS LEARNED

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The experience of PFO with LPCs is that they are very much needed in the areas of the Ninewa Plains and a key peacebuilding tool. They can only record positive experiences, however, due to lack of NGO coordination more than one LPC has been established in some areas. PFO would advocate for NGOs to collaborate more and also to not pay LPC members in order to ensure that participation is not financially motivated. Some LPCs (not those of PFO) have restricted themselves to involving only one component of society, which can cause further divisions. Going forward, PFO advocates for stronger youth involvement and more resource investment in the joint celebration of religious festivals as this has proven to be very successful.