



**Wilton  
Park**

**Report:**

**Conflict trauma and youth: exploring  
approaches for recovery and conflict  
prevention in the Middle East and  
North Africa**

Wednesday 24-Friday 26 July 2024

**In association with**

XCEPT



In association with



**XCEPT**

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT  
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

# **Report:**

# **Conflict trauma and youth: exploring approaches for recovery and conflict prevention in the Middle East and North Africa**

Wednesday 24- Friday 26 July 2024

**In association with**  
XCEPT

This Wilton Park dialogue will highlight the relevance of understanding and addressing the psychological and cognitive impacts of conflict on young people in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, offering profound insights into narratives, identity, cycles of violence, and effective approaches to mediation.

This will feature groundbreaking interdisciplinary research from the XCEPT team at King's College London. This research spans neuroscience, cognitive science, war studies, and the study of radicalisation, offering new insights into intergenerational trauma, the impact of conflict and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on reconciliation or revenge, conflict memory, extremism, and radicalisation.

It will feature case studies from Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, and address different stages of cycles of violence. It will also showcase a range of local initiatives to address the effects of conflict trauma and consider opportunities for expansion and adaptation. Through this event we hope to inform policy thinking among the UK and partner governments to shape future conflict-recovery and peacebuilding efforts.

## Executive summary

Wilton Park, in partnership with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and the XCEPT team at King's College London, hosted a dialogue on 'Conflict trauma and youth'. This event showcased new research and innovative practice centred on the impact of childhood and youth trauma on conflict recovery and prevention, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The conference brought together a diverse group of experts, including practitioners, diplomats, mediators, psychologists, cognitive scientists, conflict researchers and policymakers to discuss interdisciplinary approaches to addressing the psychological impacts of conflict and violence.

Key issues raised included the importance of integrating social and psychological considerations into policymaking, the challenges of applying Western-centric frameworks to non-Western contexts, and the need for interventions to be tailored to situation-specific needs of children and youth. The conference highlighted the critical role of addressing adverse childhood experiences and the long-term impact of trauma on personal and societal development. It also emphasised the need for holistic, community-based approaches that combine individual mental health and psychosocial support with broader political and social initiatives. Based on these areas of discussion, participants developed the following recommendations and action points:

- The need for developing **human-centred approaches** that are attuned to the emotional and psychological needs of children and young people affected by conflict, with a particular focus on preventing cycles of violence through early intervention. This includes establishing community-based mental health institutions, training counsellors, and ensuring that support services are trauma-informed and culturally sensitive.

- To be effective, mental health and psychosocial interventions should be integrated in **holistic programming** that addresses the broader needs of young people and their families, such as housing, livelihoods, health, justice, etc.
- Stronger **localisation** of policies and interventions to specific cultural contexts and communities.
- Enhancing **collaboration** with local experts and organisations, and supporting innovative forms of engagement, including the use of social media and communal capacity building.
- Encouraging **youth participation** in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, recognising their role as positive agents of change.
- Committing to **longer-term sustained funding** of conflict prevention, mental health support, and community development, including enabling local partners to play an equal role or lead on programming
- Establishing a focus on the **gender dynamics** of interventions in response to the different needs of youth populations.

This report is organised by these key themes and lists aspects that garnered the most discussion, as well as specific proposals and outcomes for addressing the psychological and political challenges of conflict trauma and youth in the MENA region.

## Introduction

The conference convened by Wilton Park brought together a diverse group of experts, including practitioners, diplomats, psychologists, cognitive scientists, conflict researchers, mediators, and policymakers to explore the intersection of psychology, conflict, and recovery, with a particular focus on children and young people in conflict-affected regions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The event aimed to bridge the gap between the emotional and psychological impacts of conflict and the practical considerations of policymaking, challenging traditional assumptions about conflict and development. It also aimed to go beyond discussions of young people as victims of conflict to consider their active role in peacebuilding or, conversely, in future cycles of violence. We adopted a 'cycles of conflict' framing to connect childhood trauma not only with past and present conflicts, but also to note the risks of future conflict arising from unaddressed trauma among the current generation of children in the region. However, the risks of using a 'cycles of conflict' framing in terms of stigmatising young people was noted.

The primary objective of the conference was to foster a dialogue that would lead to actionable insights and policy recommendations. By integrating interdisciplinary perspectives, the conference sought to address the complex psychological and social challenges faced by young people in conflict-affected areas. Key themes included the individual and collective psychological effects of violence and trauma, the role of adverse childhood experiences in shaping long-term outcomes, the need to address material and social needs alongside psychological ones, the problem of focusing on conflict-affected children as potential perpetrators ('ticking time bombs'), and the need for culturally sensitive and context-specific interventions.

The conference was set against the global backdrop of growing political competition and increased military spending, and greater pressure on governments to develop deterrents

against violence. At the same time, the provision of MHPSS programmes was declining due to reductions in funding from traditional donors. The discussions highlighted the need for a human-centred approach to policy, one that considers the psychological and emotional dimensions of conflict, particularly for vulnerable populations like children and youth.

This report captures the essence of these discussions, summarising the main themes, key issues, examples of innovative practice, and the recommendations that emerged. The insights gained from this event are intended to inform future policies and interventions, with the aim of preventing conflict, promoting recovery, and fostering long-term peace and development.



## **Psychological impacts of conflict on children and youth**

The conference highlighted the profound and lasting psychological impacts of conflict on children and youth, emphasising the urgent need to address these issues within policy frameworks. Participants noted that while the physical consequences of conflict are often immediately visible, the psychological scars are longer-lasting and impactful, influencing both individual development and broader societal stability.

A key focus was on the role of adverse childhood experiences, which can include exposure to violence, loss of family members, displacement, and other forms of traumatic exposure. These experiences can significantly alter a young person's development, affecting their emotional regulation, cognitive function, and social interactions. The long-term consequences of unaddressed trauma include an increased risk of mental health disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression, as well as a higher likelihood of involvement in future cycles of violence.

However, there is a need to move beyond clinical conceptualisations of trauma focused on the individual, to consider the role of collective trauma and narratives. For example, research from the XCEPT programme had shown how stories of violence committed during the Syrian occupation of Lebanon in the 1980s motivated young men in the next generation to join Islamist groups to fight in Syria during the uprising. Stories passed down between generations contributed to feelings of shame, anger, and desire for revenge. There is a need to understand the ways in which collective aspects of trauma intersect with personal trauma to shape behaviour and attitudes.

Neuroscientific research has the potential to elucidate processes that link social and material conditions to individual psychology and decision-making. For example, neuroscientific research carried out by a member of the XCEPT team demonstrated how feelings of social exclusion could create conditions in which individuals were more likely

to become 'devoted actors', whose extreme commitment to 'sacred values' was hard to counter through traditional counter-extremism approaches. Better integrating neuroscientific research into policy should be a priority.

Finally, the psychological impact on those working with conflict-affected children and youth was also highlighted. Good support and supervision, with attention to the mental health and wellbeing of those implementing programmes, is required to ensure that frontline staff can maintain the compassionate and common-sense approach that is required when working with young people exposed to conflict.

## **Culturally sensitive and context-specific interventions**

The conference emphasised the critical importance of designing and implementing interventions that are culturally sensitive and context-specific, particularly in conflict-affected regions where Western-centric models often fall short. Participants highlighted the limitations of universal approaches to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and called for a shift towards more nuanced, locally-informed strategies.

One of the key challenges discussed was the application of Western mental health frameworks in non-Western contexts. Many interventions developed in the Global North are based on cultural assumptions and terminologies that do not always align with the lived realities of people in conflict zones, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This disconnect can lead to interventions that are not only ineffective but may also perpetuate stigma or reinforce negative perceptions. A notable observation was that the Arabic translation for 'vulnerability', which might be seen as positive in a Western therapeutic environment, equated to 'weakness', which was seen as a very negative trait among Arabic-speaking men and boys, making engagement with MHPSS offerings harder.

To address these issues, participants advocated for a greater emphasis on local knowledge and the involvement of local stakeholders in the design and implementation of interventions. Culturally sensitive approaches were seen as essential for ensuring that interventions resonate with the communities they are intended to serve. This includes using locally relevant terminology, understanding cultural norms around mental health, and involving community leaders and organisations in the process.

There is a need to understand how communities already understand and deal with trauma and build on that. For example, there may be a greater role for family and community, rather than individual therapy, and this should be considered in programming. To

understand how trauma and mental health are understood, an anthropological approach led by local clinicians may be helpful. Furthermore, a bottom-up flow of information through supervision structures should be encouraged to inform and refine interventions, rather than relying on only top-down instruction when implementing interventions. In mental health programming, it may be appropriate to avoid medical labels (e.g., PTSD, depression) and instead use narrative formulations that describe a child's difficulties in a way that reduces the risk of stigma. This may also prove a more 'child-friendly' method of providing MHPSS to children, using language they can understand and resonate with.

Participants stressed the importance of adopting a holistic approach to mental health in conflict-affected areas, integrating psychological support with a wider range of programming and with broader social and political reforms. This includes recognising the complex interplay between individual trauma, material conditions, and community dynamics, and ensuring that interventions are not just focused on treating symptoms but also on addressing the underlying causes of psychological distress. As such, addressing housing, livelihoods, security, and justice, as well as restoring a sense of normality and hope through education, was seen as at least as important as MHPSS interventions. Forced separation from parents can also be a significant source of trauma for children – often more traumatic than exposure to conflict – and this should be taken account in policy (e.g., repatriation of mothers and children associated with ISIS).

## **Holistic approaches to mental health**

There are a range of ways to take a holistic approach to mental health, examples of which are given here.

- Case management and MHPSS: many NGOs use a case management approach to mental health, where a case manager makes an initial assessment of the needs of the young person and their family. This might include mental health or psychosocial support services but also aims to address the family's wider needs.

This could include MHPSS services for the parents or other family members, medical services, housing support, legal advice, cash assistance, etc. This approach recognises that mental health in conflict and post-conflict settings is affected at least as much by daily stressors as it is by conflict exposure, and that children’s mental health is affected by their parents’ mental health.

- MARCH Lebanon: This project approaches peacebuilding through theatre, culture, mental health, and economic development. Through bringing together young male former fighters to create theatre and carry out work to improve their neighbourhoods, this project recognises that informal activities that build trust and give people a sense of purpose are more effective than formal activities like workshops or the passive process of receiving services. Ultimately, it recognises that young people need to have hope that things can be better and the agency to drive change.

When it comes to addressing the risk of young people perpetrating violence, there are limits to punitive approaches that do not take into account underlying trauma and mental health problems. Such approaches were criticised for neglecting the nuances of individual experiences and failing to provide necessary support for long-term recovery and resilience. Importantly, many children and young people affected by conflict are not ‘radicalised’ or at risk of committing violence and the language of “ticking timebombs” risks stigmatising them and making it less likely that they receive the care they need. Viewing children through this risk lens may make it hard to see their potential in driving positive change. Case studies of repatriated European children from IDP camps in Syria demonstrated largely positive outcomes from reintegration into their communities.

Finally, it was noted that a major barrier to the reintegration of youth who have been associated with armed groups is stigma, including the attitudes of host communities, who view these young people as threats. There can be risk of retaliation if they or their families return, undermining reintegration attempts. However, hostility is often driven by

victims not having justice or the same access to resources as returnees. There is also a question around how the need for justice and clear moral norms can be squared with the need for reconciliation and reintegration. There is inherent tension between the societal need for red lines on behaviour, and the resulting shame and its impact on the psyche of children and youth who have been associated with armed groups.

This tension can vary depending on the age of the children when they were involved in violence. Based on the UNSC Children and Armed Conflict mandate, if a child is associated with an armed group, they have been recruited and used; such recruitment and use is a war crime if the child is/was under 15. Juvenile justice standards are clear that children formerly associated with armed forces/groups should be treated primarily as victims and should receive community-based reintegration support; however, this view not always understood or endorsed in practice.

## **Youth empowerment in peacebuilding and conflict prevention**

A recurring theme throughout the conference was the pivotal role that youth can play actively in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Participants highlighted that while young people are often perceived as either victims or perpetrators in conflict situations, they also have the potential to be powerful agents of change. The discussions centred on the importance of empowering youth, recognising their agency, and creating spaces for their active participation in shaping peace and justice processes.

One of the key points raised was the need to shift the narrative around youth from one of risk to one of opportunity. Traditional approaches often view young people, especially those in conflict zones, through a lens of vulnerability and danger, focusing primarily on preventing their involvement in violence. However, participants advocated for a more positive framing that sees youth as contributors to peace and development. This involves not only protecting them from harm but also actively involving them in decision-making processes and giving them the tools and opportunities to lead change in their communities.

Recognising and giving space for young people's agency is of critical importance to allow young people to move on from experiences of trauma and help build a more positive future. Activities that require active participation were contrasted to the experience of being a passive recipient of services; even when young people require mental health services, they still need to be able to develop hope that their lives can get better. For youths who have been involved with armed groups, programming needs to help restore the sense of agency that was offered by being part of the group. When they leave these groups, they lose the sense of purpose that the group offered, while also experiencing the moral judgement of the communities that they are attempting to reintegrate to. This poses particular challenges for programming.

Participants emphasised the need for child protection to be mainstreamed across the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda. Children and youth should be central to discussions on conflict prevention and recovery, particularly in fragile contexts where they are most affected by the violence and are uniquely vulnerable, including to recruitment and use by armed forces and groups. The importance of fostering bottom-up approaches to democracy promotion was also noted, with local civil society organisations playing a pivotal role. Additionally, there is a need to bridge the gap between program design and delivery, and to apply cross-country best practices where appropriate, such as learning from successful programs in Lebanon and applying them in other regions like Iraq.

The conference then explored various strategies for effectively engaging youth in peacebuilding efforts. This included participatory approaches, encouraging the involvement of young people in the design, implementation, and evaluation of peacebuilding programs. This not only ensures that their perspectives are included but also helps to build their skills and confidence. A different approach focused on education and skill development, providing education and training opportunities that equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need to contribute to peacebuilding. This includes formal education, vocational training, and leadership development programs.

Cultural and artistic expressions formed the third approach and focus on utilising creative and cultural activities, such as role-playing, photography, and storytelling, as tools for youth to express their experiences, share their perspectives, and engage in dialogue. These activities were seen as particularly effective in contexts where traditional forms of expression may be restricted or stigmatised. More generally, initiatives that are led by young people themselves allow them to take ownership of peacebuilding efforts and ensuring that these initiatives are grounded in the realities of their communities.

However, the discussions also acknowledged the significant challenges faced by youth in conflict zones. Many young people are affected by trauma, social exclusion, and a lack of



economic opportunities, which can hinder their ability to participate in peacebuilding. Additionally, there are often structural barriers, such as limited access to funding and resources, that prevent youth from fully engaging in these efforts.

To overcome these challenges, participants emphasised the importance of providing targeted support to youth, particularly those who are most marginalised. This includes ensuring that funding mechanisms are accessible to youth-led organisations and that there are opportunities for young people to connect with mentors and allies who can support their efforts. The need for a more inclusive approach to funding and resources, which takes into account the specific needs and circumstances of youth in different contexts, was also highlighted.

The conference highlighted the critical importance of building social capital among young people in conflict zones. While there are many workshops and short-term initiatives available, participants emphasised the need for long-term, programmatic activities to help rebuild the social fabric and emotional resilience of children and youth. By creating environments where young people feel cared for and supported - whether by their family or through alternative support structures - interventions can mitigate the long-term damage caused by early exposure to violence. A key factor in building social capital is addressing the growing desensitisation to violence that children experience through social media. The 'education vacuum' around social media was identified as a significant gap in current interventions, with children being exposed to violence without the necessary context or guidance. Participants suggested that, rather than censorship, educational interventions should be developed to teach children how to critically engage with social media content, potentially through local organisations or school systems.

Participants also discussed the need to acknowledge and address the frustrations and anger felt by many young people in conflict zones. These frustrations, if not channelled productively, could lead to greater traction for extremist groups. The conference acknowledged that many young people are attracted to subversive activities as a form of

expression. Therefore, there is a need to create alternative pathways for this energy, allowing youth to engage in constructive, 'subversive' actions that challenge oppressive systems without resorting to violence, including through humour and the arts. The challenge, however, lies in how to fund and support such initiatives in different countries, particularly those where any subversive activities are seen as a threat to the status quo.

In conclusion, the conference underscored the critical role of youth in building and sustaining peace in conflict-affected regions. By empowering young people and creating opportunities for their active participation, policymakers and practitioners can harness their potential as drivers of positive change. The discussions called for a renewed commitment to youth empowerment in peacebuilding, with a focus on inclusion, education, and the recognition of youth as essential partners in the pursuit of lasting peace.

## **Challenges and recommendations for sustainable interventions**

The conference brought to light several critical challenges that undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions in conflict-affected regions. These challenges are multifaceted, ranging from structural issues in program design to the complexities of funding and implementation.

One of the primary challenges discussed was the significant gap between program design and delivery. Many interventions, especially those initiated by international organisations, are often designed with limited input from local communities. This disconnect can result in programs that are poorly suited to the specific needs and contexts of the target populations. For example, skills programmes for young people are often driven by the interests of donors and do not always map onto skills that are needed and will lead to jobs. In these circumstances, young people may make the rational decision not to engage in programmes, but if the skills-work mismatch has not been

identified then young people can be labelled as apathetic or hard to engage.

Furthermore, the pressure to deliver quick results often leads to the prioritisation of short-term outcomes over long-term impact, further compromising the sustainability of these initiatives.

To address these issues, participants emphasised the need for more inclusive and participatory approaches to program design. Involving local stakeholders, particularly those who are directly affected by conflict, was seen as essential for ensuring that interventions are relevant and effective. This includes not only consulting with local communities but also empowering them to take a leading role in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs. Such an approach would help to bridge the gap between external expertise and local knowledge, creating more contextually appropriate and sustainable interventions.

Funding models also emerged as a significant barrier to sustainability. The conference highlighted the limitations of traditional funding mechanisms, which often favour large, established organisations over smaller, local entities. This can lead to a concentration of resources in the hands of a few, while local organisations - who often have a deep understanding of the context - struggle to access the support they need to operate effectively. Furthermore, where funding goes to international organisations, there is the risk that they withdraw from the context after programme implementation, leaving little impact beyond the cycle of the programme. Programming constraints can also mean that services for children are not linked up to services in young adulthood. Children's services typically cut off at the age of 18 and there is not necessarily a transition into other services, leaving young people vulnerable at this point. Participants noted that a strategic vision is currently lacking in much of funding and programming for MENA region beyond tactical short-term interventions. Funding needs to promote and reflect the scope of longer-term strategic thinking.

Participants called for a re-evaluation of funding practices, advocating for more flexible and accessible funding models that prioritise local capacity building. This includes providing smaller grants that are more easily accessible to local organisations, extending the duration of funding cycles to allow for more sustainable planning, and reducing the bureaucratic hurdles that can impede local participation. Additionally, there was a strong recommendation for international donors to work more closely with local partners, fostering relationships based on mutual respect and shared goals.

Participants emphasised the need to shorten the supply chains of service delivery in conflict interventions to save resources and ensure that the majority of funding is directed toward impactful interventions rather than excessive planning. Local partners should be involved at an earlier stage of project design and implementation, though many may lack the necessary business structures to participate effectively. Providing business training and development support can help bridge this gap. One barrier to involving local organisations at the planning stage is the short notice given for many funding opportunities, which does not allow time to build meaningful partnerships before submitting funding applications. Extending the time between funding announcement and submission deadline would help; it would also help to split the process into an initial outline proposal stage followed by an invitation to some applicants to submit a full bid.

A focus on sustainability is essential, with local organisations being empowered to take the lead in early implementation, acknowledging that this process may be 'messy' and require adaptive learning along the way. Embracing a 'fail fast' approach - where evaluation and adjustment occur simultaneously with planning - was encouraged to allow for quicker responses to challenges. Moreover, participants discussed how this dialogue could generate ideas and programmes that inform policy, calling for a reduction in bureaucratic hurdles that slow down implementation, particularly when setting up governmental-level initiatives that can take years to materialise. One popular suggestion was to consider providing small amounts of funding for entrepreneurial approaches that have a high risk of failure - but also the potential to be high reward - rather than only those

that are relatively low risk. This could employ a 'Dragon's Den' format, where young people could bid for small amounts of funding to pursue highly novel programming approaches.

A critical issue discussed in this context, however, was the pressure on implementers to produce measurable outcomes within already short time frames. This results-driven approach can limit the scope of interventions, pushing organisations to focus on what is easily quantifiable rather than what is most impactful. Participants noted that this often leads to the neglect of more complex, long-term goals, such as social cohesion and community resilience, which are harder to measure but crucial for lasting peace and development.

To counter this, participants recommended adopting a more holistic approach to monitoring and evaluation, one that balances the need for accountability with the recognition that some of the most important outcomes, such as changes in community attitudes or the strengthening of local institutions, may take years to manifest and can be difficult to quantify. There was a call for funders to be more patient and supportive of innovative approaches that might not yield immediate results but have the potential for significant long-term impact. To avoid a focus on only those outcomes that are easily quantifiable, funders should consider a wider range of evidence in programming. This could include narrative accounts, case studies, and story-telling approaches that can capture a wider range of changes than can be measured with a set of quantitative measures. Funders could also benefit from visiting programmes to understand their impact, rather than just relying on reports. At the same time, it is important to critically evaluate programming that has not been successful to learn what led to failure. There are disincentives to organisations who are seeking further funding to admit failure; there needs to be space to explore the causes of poorer outcomes and collaboratively work towards improvements.

Finally, the discussions underscored the importance of sustaining interventions beyond the initial funding period. Participants stressed that for programs to be truly effective, they must be designed with a long-term perspective, including plans for how they will be maintained and adapted as circumstances change. This could involve building local capacity to take over the management of programs, securing diverse funding streams, and fostering partnerships that can provide ongoing support.

In conclusion, the conference identified several key challenges to the sustainability of interventions through the conflict cycle (including fragile, conflict-affected and post-conflict settings) including gaps between design and delivery, funding limitations, and the pressures of short-termism. The recommendations put forward emphasised the need for more inclusive, flexible, and patient approaches that prioritise local engagement, long-term impact, and sustainable outcomes. The need to create space for novel and higher risk interventions driven by entrepreneurial young people was also stressed. By addressing these challenges, policymakers and practitioners can create more effective and enduring solutions to the complex problems facing conflict-affected communities.

## **Integrating social media and technology in conflict interventions**

The role of social media and technology in conflict interventions was a significant focus of discussion during the conference, with participants exploring both the opportunities and challenges that these tools present. As digital platforms increasingly shape the experiences and perceptions of young people in conflict zones, understanding how to leverage these technologies for positive outcomes has become crucial.

One of the key points raised was the dual nature of social media. On the one hand, social media platforms can be powerful tools for engagement, allowing for the rapid dissemination of peacebuilding messages, the mobilisation of youth, and the facilitation of dialogue across divides. Participants highlighted successful examples of social media campaigns that have promoted narratives of peace, countered extremist propaganda, and provided a platform for marginalised voices. These initiatives demonstrate the potential of social media to reach large audiences quickly and to engage young people who might otherwise be difficult to access through traditional channels.

On the other hand, participants also acknowledged the risks associated with the use of social media in conflict settings. These platforms can easily be co-opted to spread misinformation, fuel hatred, and exacerbate tensions. The conference underscored the need for careful management and monitoring of online content to mitigate these risks. Participants discussed the challenges of regulating social media in a way that respects freedom of expression while preventing the spread of harmful content, noting that this balance is difficult to achieve in any society, but perhaps particularly so in conflict zones where the stakes are high and regulation may be weak.

In addition to social media, the conference also explored the broader use of technology in conflict interventions. This included discussions on the potential of digital tools for tracking and monitoring conflict dynamics, enhancing the delivery of humanitarian aid,

and supporting the mental health and psychosocial well-being of affected populations. For example, mobile apps and online platforms can be used to provide psychological support to individuals in remote or inaccessible areas, offering a lifeline to those who might otherwise be without help.

Participants emphasised the importance of harnessing technology in a way that is context-specific and responsive to the needs of the local population. This involves understanding the digital landscape in conflict-affected regions, including the types of technology that are accessible and popular among different demographics. It also requires sensitivity to the local cultural and political context, as the use of technology can have unintended consequences if not carefully managed.

The conference also highlighted the role of social media influencers and local content creators in shaping narratives and influencing public opinion. Engaging these individuals as partners in peacebuilding efforts was seen as a promising strategy for reaching wider audiences and promoting positive messages. However, this approach requires building trust and ensuring that the content produced is authentic and resonates with local audiences.

In terms of practical recommendations, participants called for greater investment in training and capacity building for local organisations and individuals to effectively use social media and technology in their work. This includes not only technical skills but also strategies for content creation, audience engagement, and crisis management. Additionally, there was a strong emphasis on the need for collaboration between technology companies, governments, and civil society to address the challenges of online regulation and to develop tools that can help prevent the misuse of digital platforms in conflict settings. Crucially, participants noted that such investing efforts should take place across the socio-economic ecosystem of adolescents. For example,



programmes that support parental caregivers and youth through comprehensive school health efforts, may be a valuable approach to promote positive youth development.

In conclusion, while social media and technology present significant opportunities for enhancing conflict interventions, they also pose substantial risks that need to be carefully managed. The conference highlighted the importance of a nuanced and context-specific approach, one that leverages the positive potential of these tools while mitigating their negative impacts. By investing in the right skills, partnerships, and strategies, policymakers and practitioners can better harness the power of social media and technology to support peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts.

## **Gender dynamics in conflict and recovery**

The conference emphasised the importance of understanding and addressing gender dynamics in both conflict situations and recovery processes. Participants underscored that conflict affects men, women, boys, and girls differently, and that effective interventions must take these differences into account to be truly effective.

One of the key points discussed was the way societal norms and expectations around gender can influence who becomes involved in conflict and how they experience it. For instance, traditional notions of masculinity mean that men and boys are more likely than women and girls to take on roles as fighters or protectors, which can lead to their involvement in violence or armed groups. This dynamic not only places young men at risk but also shapes the way they are perceived by their communities and how they perceive themselves, often leading to long-term psychological impacts. This can result in maladaptive coping strategies such as alcohol and substance abuse, perpetration of domestic or other violence, as well as impacting men's ability to work and fulfil masculine roles. On the other hand, women and girls often face specific forms of violence and marginalisation in conflict settings, including sexual violence, exploitation, and social exclusion. The conference highlighted the need for interventions that address these gender-specific vulnerabilities, such as programs that provide psychosocial support to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and initiatives that promote the inclusion of women and girls in peacebuilding processes.

Evidence has also shown that boys who suffer violence as children are more likely to perpetuate it as men. Conversely, girls who experience violence are more likely to suffer it as women. This demonstrates that adopting a gender sensitive lens to the way men, women, girls and boys experience conflict can enable interventions that disrupt cycles of violence and violent, patriarchal societies.

Participants also discussed the intersection of gender with other factors, such as age, social status, and cultural background, noting that these intersections can further complicate the experiences of those affected by conflict. For example, boys and men who have been subjected to sexual violence, which is commonly used as a way of emasculating men during conflict, or other forms of exploitation may face significant stigma and may be reluctant to seek help due to societal taboos around male vulnerability. Similarly, women and girls who are perceived as being associated with 'enemy' groups may be ostracised by their communities, making their reintegration and recovery particularly challenging; this is evident in the case of Yazidi women and girls kidnapped by ISIL.

The conference also explored the role of gender in post-conflict recovery and peacebuilding. Participants highlighted that women are often underrepresented in formal peace processes, despite evidence that their involvement leads to more inclusive and sustainable outcomes. Efforts to meaningfully and safely include women in peace negotiations and post-conflict governance were seen as essential for ensuring that the needs and perspectives of all segments of society are reflected in the solutions that are developed.

Moreover, there was a strong emphasis on the need to challenge and change harmful gender norms that perpetuate cycles of violence. Participants noted that programs aimed at promoting alternative forms of masculinity, where men and boys are provided spaces where they can share experiences of trauma and engage in non-violent forms of conflict resolution, can be particularly effective. MHPSS interventions that are embedded in other programming and not explicitly framed in terms of mental health and vulnerability may be more successful for men than standard mental health services. Similarly, empowering women and girls to take on leadership roles in their communities was identified as a crucial strategy for fostering long-term peace and stability.

However, participants also acknowledged the challenges of implementing gender-sensitive interventions in conflict-affected regions. These include cultural resistance to

changing traditional gender roles, the risk of re-stigmatisation, and the lack of resources dedicated to gender-specific programs. For example, in some settings there can be significant objection to the involvement of women as this is construed as undermining traditional gender roles; there may be inherent tension between culturally sensitive approaches and efforts to include women. Another challenge is the lack of MHPSS services aimed at men and boys (relative to those aimed at women and girls). There can be lack of donor buy in for these services and they are sometimes justified as being a way to reduce domestic violence (to protect women and girls) rather than being important in their own right. This risks further perpetuating stereotypes of men as perpetrators rather than victims of conflict. To overcome these challenges, the conference called for increased funding and support for gender-focused initiatives, as well as the integration of gender perspectives into all stages of conflict intervention and recovery planning. Local organisations are likely to be best placed to advise on ways of managing these issues in programming while navigating strongly held beliefs about gender roles in their communities.

In conclusion, the discussions at the conference highlighted the critical role of gender in shaping the experiences of conflict and recovery. Effective interventions must be sensitive to these dynamics, addressing the specific needs of men, women, boys, and girls, and challenging the societal norms that contribute to violence and marginalisation. By incorporating a gender lens into conflict resolution and recovery efforts, policymakers and practitioners can create more inclusive and sustainable pathways to peace.

## Recommendations and next steps

The conference concluded with a series of policy recommendations and actionable steps aimed at addressing the complex challenges discussed over the course of the event. These recommendations are intended to guide policymakers, international organisations, and local stakeholders in developing more effective and sustainable interventions in conflict-affected regions.

- 1 Human-centred approaches:** Peacebuilding and conflict-resolution policies should prioritise the emotional and psychological needs of children and young people affected by conflict, focusing on preventing cycles of violence through early intervention and comprehensive psychological support systems. Specific next steps include establishing dedicated units within governmental and non-governmental organisations to ensure that psychological support is a core component of peacebuilding efforts; and allocating funding specifically for mental health initiatives in conflict-affected areas.
- 2 Stronger localisation** of policies and interventions to the specific cultural contexts and communities they target, ensuring that they are relevant and effective. Specific next steps include developing guidelines for culturally sensitive program design and implementation; providing training for international staff on cultural competence and the importance of localisation; and promoting partnerships with local organisations that have a deep understanding of the community's needs. This should include tackling barriers to participation for smaller local organisations, including appropriate deadlines for funding, and accessible means for applying where there is lower technical capability and/or experience of such applications.

- 3 Enhancing collaboration and supporting innovation:** Strengthen collaboration with local experts and organisations, and support innovative forms of engagement, including the use of social media and communal capacity building, to enhance the effectiveness of interventions. Specific next steps include fostering partnerships between international donors, local organisations, and technology companies to develop tools and platforms that support peacebuilding efforts; implementing training programs for local organisations on effective social media use, digital literacy, and innovative engagement strategies; and encouraging the creation of networks that facilitate collaboration and information sharing among diverse stakeholders.
- 4 Encouraging youth participation in peacebuilding:** Young people should be recognised as key stakeholders in peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts, with policies designed to facilitate their active participation and support their role as positive agents of change. This should acknowledge the role of local communities in creating these opportunities, including efforts to combat the perception of children merely as victims or threats.
- 5 Committing to long-term sustained funding:** There should be a commitment to longer-term, sustained funding for conflict prevention, mental health and psychosocial support, and community development, particularly in partnerships with local organisations. Specific next steps include encouraging donors to adopt flexible funding models that support long-term planning and capacity building; extending the duration of funding cycles to allow for sustainable program development; and ensuring that funding mechanisms are accessible to local organisations and that they are designed to support the long-term sustainability of interventions.

- 6 Recognition of gender dynamics.** In each of the conflicts we touched upon, experience of violence and trauma was highly gendered. Therefore, interventions needed to be gender-sensitive, recognising the different challenges and opportunities of interventions for different genders.

## Conclusion

This conference on the impact of childhood and youth trauma on conflict recovery and prevention highlighted the urgent need for a more integrated and human-centred approach to conflict resolution and recovery. Through a series of discussions that brought together experts from diverse fields, the event underscored the importance of addressing the psychological, cultural, and social dimensions of conflict, particularly as they affect the most vulnerable populations.

Key themes emerged around the necessity of tailoring interventions to the specific cultural contexts of the affected regions, recognising the critical role of youth as agents of change, and ensuring that interventions are both sustainable and locally driven. Participants called for stronger collaboration between international organisations, local stakeholders, and technology partners to innovate and improve the effectiveness of conflict interventions.

The policy recommendations and next steps outlined in this report provide a roadmap for translating the insights gained during the conference into concrete actions. By focusing on the emotional and psychological needs of children and young people, fostering youth participation, and committing to long-term, culturally sensitive interventions, stakeholders can create more effective and sustainable pathways to peace.

The insights and recommendations from this conference are intended to inform future policies and programs, with the hope that they will contribute to more resilient communities and a more peaceful world. Wilton Park and its partners remains committed

to facilitating these critical conversations and supporting the implementation of the ideas discussed.

Wilton Park | 06/01/2025

Wilton Park reports are brief summaries of the main points and conclusions of a conference. The reports reflect rapporteurs' personal interpretations of the proceedings. As such they do not constitute any institutional policy of Wilton Park nor do they necessarily represent the views of the rapporteur. Wilton Park reports and any recommendations contained therein are for participants and are not a statement of policy for Wilton Park, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) or His Majesty's Government.

Should you wish to read other Wilton Park reports, or participate in upcoming Wilton Park events, please consult our website [www.wiltonpark.org.uk](http://www.wiltonpark.org.uk).

To receive our monthly bulletin and latest updates, please subscribe to [www.wiltonpark.org.uk/newsletter](http://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/newsletter)



Wilton Park is a discreet think-space designed for experts and policy-makers to engage in genuine dialogue with a network of diverse voices, in order to address the most pressing challenges of our time.

[enquiries@wiltonpark.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@wiltonpark.org.uk)

Switchboard: +44 (0)1903 815020

Wilton Park, Wiston House, Steyning,  
West Sussex, BN44 3DZ, United Kingdom

**[wiltonpark.org.uk](http://wiltonpark.org.uk)**

