

Peres Center for Peace on peace-building in times of conflict

The Peres Center for Peace understands that in this region, the opportunity for Palestinian and Israeli, and Jewish and Arab children to meet each other is incredibly rare; media, education systems and the current political circumstances keep the two sides apart, while maintaining existing harmful stereotypes and dehumanisation of the "other." The Peres Center has recognised that children and youth are severely affected by conflict, and due to the lack of interaction and positive dialogue, they are susceptible to developing fears and misconceptions of the "other." As the future of the region, they have the most to gain from the development of durable peace and thus, it is crucial to engage children and youth in peace education programming.

This unique holistic, cross-border programme utilises sport as a peace education tool to bring together Palestinian and Israeli, and Jewish and Arab children and youth together in a safe, healthy and fun environment built on principles of equality, diversity, respect and mutual understanding. Sport, from values of teamwork and common goals to shared struggles and victories, has the power to unite youth from different cultures and backgrounds. Through a language understood by all players, Palestinian and Israeli, Jewish and Arab children unite under the common banner of sport, cheering each other on, helping each other win and building lasting friendships. The Twinned Peace Sport Schools (TPSS) project uses a variety of sports and peace education methods that enable children to meet friends from "the other side," play in mixed teams, mitigate direct competition and encourage values of teamwork, equality and mutual appreciation.

Since 2002, the programme has touched the lives of over 20,000 Palestinian and Israeli, Jewish and Arab, girls and boys from some 35 disadvantaged Palestinian, Arab and Israeli communities. Since the programme's inception, the Peres Center has organised over 800 joint Palestinian-Israeli activities, over 180 Palestinian and Israeli coaches have received peace education through sport training, and our message of peacebuilding has been disseminated to over 100,000 indirect beneficiaries. The programme evaluations indicate that long-term (2-3 years) participation in the TPSS program increases positive perception of the "other" and of one's self.

An evaluation report from 2013 showed that the programme succeeded in achieving a positive change in attitudes among the participants towards the "other side".

For example, when the participants were asked, "Who is more of a warmonger?" at the very start of the programme, 93% of the Palestinian participants answered: Jews, compared with 47% at the end of the year-long programme. Moreover, initially, there was no one who answered that both sides promote war equally, compared to 28% in the final encounter. Similar results arose on the Israeli side, as in the first questionnaire, 100% reflected that Arabs promote war more than Israelis, compared with 63% in the final encounter. At the first meeting 0% answered that Jews and Arabs desire war equally, compared to 38% in the final activity.

When asked to rate their agreement with the sentence: "*Currently I do not believe in Palestinians*", at the beginning of the programme, 63% of the Israeli participants claimed for the most part that they do not believe in the Palestinians, compared to 25 % who agreed with this statement at the end of the programme.

Changes in mindsets were also documented through mid-project interviews. For instance, Diia Daud, 12, from Nablus, stated in the beginning of the programme, "*I thought they (the Israeli participants) wouldn't want to sit with us and that they will have a hard time connecting to us*", while after having mutual experiences, he referred to the Israeli participants, saying, "*they are nice kids, same age as*

us. We have a lot of things in common, like playing soccer. We were able to connect from the first joint activity”.

When asked about the first joint activity, Sagi, 11, from Sderot noted that *“In the beginning we did not approach them, we just fought. I used to think like everyone else that they were only good at throwing rocks, cursing and making fouls”*. Later on in the project, Sagi stated, *“now we know that if there is a will, there is a way... I want to come visit them in Nablus in their schools, to see the daily life there, it is interesting to me. They say that it is more difficult there, there is more poverty. I want to know how they really feel about us”*.

A ten year-old girl from the Israeli peripheral and underprivileged town of Kiryat Gat believes that the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians is based on the absence of a shared language and religious difference. For her, the problem is *“that we do not know the other side of the wall”*. Meanwhile, in Yatta, a conservative town in the southern Hebron hills in the Palestinian Authority, lives an 11 year-old girl who is certain that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a result of the two sides not understanding one another. *“I have never met any Israeli girl...there are very few sites where we can gather”*. Both girls reside in communities that are typically less receptive to conciliation and peace-building activities, and are unable to provide children with high-quality extra-curricular activities, on the other. Through participation in the TPSS program, the Palestinian girl confesses: *“For once I forgot about the barriers and the fear...we are all sisters in the team”*. The Israeli girl agrees: *“There I understood that we were not so different...there we all speak the same language”*. Israelis and Palestinians, Muslims, Christians and Jews, who do not usually integrate have the opportunity to mix and to learn about the “other”.

A recent conclusion from a 2014 programme evaluation report indicates that:

“TPSS emphasises the humanity of the participants. It created a soft, nurturing and accepting framework, and encouraged participants to create friendships among themselves, and reveal the positive aspects of their personalities. In this sense the programme precisely follows the “the optimal contact rules between groups” designed by Allport: equal status, common goals (idea of peace that is easy to connect with, along with sportive purposes), continuous, meaningful contact, that is supported by a prestigious establishment. TPSS works against all the odds” in a challenging environment, but with tenacity in clear vision.”

Furthermore, the TPSS programme impacts the wider community, as the ripple effects of the project reach far beyond the target group. Participants, their parents, and coaches promote their experiences with “the other” in a positive way, among their families, friends, colleagues, and pupils, who as a result, are encouraged to consider similar engagement with “the other.” Additionally, the participating communities overcome resistance to the “other.” Local implementing partners, participants and their families and friends become less resistant to the idea of interaction with “the other.”

Regarding the recent escalations, it is important to understand that the TPSS programme runs according to the academic year and therefore, no activities are occurring at this time, during the summer vacation. That being said, at the very beginning of the recent escalations, a delegation of 6 Israeli and Palestinian youth travelled together to Brazil to participate in the FIFA Football for Hope Festival. This group remained cohesive and committed to the goal of their joint mission. When approached by other delegations and media, the participants stated that it is important to remember that we are all humans and that they succeeded in putting politics aside in order to come together to represent that sport can unite people even in times of crisis.

For the past couple of weeks, the majority of the Israeli communities that participate in the programme are currently faced with the daily barrage of rockets from Gaza. Furthermore, the current situation has increased the tensions both between the Arab and Jewish communities within

Israel as well as cross-border, between Israelis and Palestinians. Additionally, it is important to note that the programme engages Palestinian participants from the Palestinian Authority (West Bank) and unfortunately has not be able to engage participants from Gaza since 2007.

We are currently in constant contact with all of our local implementing partners in Israel and the Palestinian Authority. It is clear that we will have a lot of work to do once the school year begins in September. Unfortunately, this is not the first time that our programmes have been faced with the challenge of the escalation of tensions, violence, and the deterioration of the political atmosphere. Our programme staff continue to carefully address these issues and work with local partners to provide the participants with the appropriate support and attention that is necessary in such situations.