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Stitching the Bridge

Cross-Cultural Dialogue, Civic Imagination, and the Practice of Peace in North Bekaa

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Zusammenfassung

Dieses Kapitel reflektiert ein Jahrzehnt der Friedensarbeit von Peace of Art Lebanon in der nordbekaanischen Region des Libanon. Ausgehend von relationalen und kontaktbasierten Ansätzen untersucht es interkulturellen Dialog anhand von drei Praxisfeldern: politischer Bildung mit Jugendlichen, der Koordination zivilgesellschaftlicher Akteure und der Dokumentation von kulturellem Erbe. Daraus entwickelt das Kapitel einen vierstufigen methodischen Rahmen aus Kontextanalyse, partizipativem Co-Design, strukturiertem Kontakt auf Augenhöhe und adaptivem Monitoring. Es argumentiert, dass interkultureller Dialog in langanhaltenden Krisen keine punktuelle Intervention, sondern eine nachhaltige Organisationspraxis ist, die durch wiederholte Begegnungen über konfessionelle, generationelle und geografische Grenzen hinweg entsteht und durch bewusst entwickelte, übertragbare Methoden getragen wird.

Schlagwörter: Interkultureller Dialog, Friedensförderung, Zivilgesellschaft, Frieden

Abstract

This chapter reflects on a decade of peacebuilding by Peace of Art Lebanon in North Bekaa, Lebanon. Drawing on relational and contact-based approaches, it examines cross-cultural dialogue through youth civic education, civil-society coordination, and heritage documentation. From these practices, it develops a four-stage framework of context mapping, participatory co-design, equal-status contact, and adaptive monitoring. The chapter argues that in protracted crises, cross-cultural dialogue is not a discrete intervention but a sustained organizational practice, built through repeated encounters across confessional, generational, and geographic divides and supported by deliberate, replicable methodologies.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Dialogue, Peacebuilding, Civil Society, Peace

Writing from the Border

Peace of Art Lebanon was founded in 2016 as a Lebanese, locally rooted non-governmental organization with a mandate spanning youth empowerment, civic education, peacebuilding, intercultural dialogue, and creative expression. It is, today, one of three member organizations of the Peace of Art International Network (POAINTL), a collaborative international network that brings together the legally registered Peace of Art organizations in Lebanon, the United States, and Germany under a shared vision of promoting peace, human dignity, creativity, dialogue, education, and sustainable community development. Rather than a separate legal entity, POAINTL functions as the strategic framework connecting its member organizations through formal cooperation, allowing them to share expertise, strengthen institutional capacities, develop joint initiatives, pursue international partnerships, and support one another toward greater collective impact, while fully respecting the legal independence, governance, and national responsibilities of each member. Through this cooperation, the network aims to connect local action with global partnership, fostering inclusive solutions that empower communities and contribute to lasting peace across borders.

North Bekaa, and the villages of Al-Ain and Al-Fakiha in particular, sit at one of Lebanon's most layered borders: a confessional border between Sunni, Shia, and Christian communities; an administrative border between the Baalbek-Hermel and Bekaa governorates; and a literal, porous state border with Syria that has shaped the region's economy, its kinship networks, and its experience of conflict for generations. To work on peace and cross-cultural dialogue from this location is to work without the luxury of distance: the communities Peace of Art Lebanon serves are not a case study selected from afar but the villages in which the organization's staff, volunteers, and beneficiaries live, raise children, bury their dead, and rebuild after each new shock.

Over the period examined in this chapter, Peace of Art's work expanded beyond North Bekaa through partnerships with organizations including PAX for Peace, UNESCO, Search for Common Ground, Perspectivity, United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY), European Endowment for Democracy (EED), Human Security Collective (HSC), and multiple national and regional civil society networks. These partnerships provided opportunities to compare locally developed practices with broader regional peacebuilding approaches and informed the methodological reflections presented here.

That connection between the very local and the increasingly international is itself part of the story this chapter tells. As a reflection of the growth and recognition of POAINTL's peacebuilding work, the network is now legally registered in Lebanon, the United States, and Germany, and is establishing an office in Syria to further expand its regional presence, an expansion shaped less by ambition than by the cross-border character of the region Peace of Art Lebanon has always worked in. In recognition of these efforts, and of his broader contribution to the field of peacebuilding, Peace of Art co-founder Mahdi Yahya received the Bremen International Peace Award 2026 from the Die Schwelle Foundation[1], in the category of Pioneering Peace Work. Over nearly a decade, Peace of Art Lebanon's programming has moved fluidly between long-term programmatic initiatives and emergency response, tracking the rhythm of a region where calm is punctuated by displacement, ceasefire violations, and economic shock. This chapter is written jointly by two members of the organization who, between them, have carried roles spanning project design, field facilitation, monitoring and evaluation, fundraising, and direct community engagement, a structural feature of small, rurally based NGOs rarely theorized in the peacebuilding literature, but one that, we argue, fundamentally shapes how cross-cultural dialogue is practiced on the ground.

Our intention is not to present a polished success narrative but an honest, theoretically situated account of what cross-cultural dialogue looks like when pursued not as a single intervention but as an organizational habit, sustained across multiple programmes and crises, in one of Lebanon's most historically marginalized regions. In doing so, the chapter speaks directly to several of the themes this volume takes up: intercultural communication and conflict transformation, the place of religion and identity in dialogue, digital spaces as sites of cross-cultural exchange, and the educational and academic partnerships through which local practice and international scholarship meet. We do not write from South Asia, and make no claim to that region's transregional peace initiatives; what we offer instead is a companion vantage point from another protracted-crisis borderland, in the hope that the parallels prove useful.

"Our understanding of dialogue did not emerge from observing projects from a distance. It developed through years of facilitating difficult conversations, revising programs after setbacks, responding to crises, and returning repeatedly to the same communities. The chapter therefore reflects both institutional learning and the

[1] Mahdi Yahya received the International Bremen Peace Award 2026. https://dieschwelle.de/en/peace-award-2026/mahdi-yahya.

gradual transformation of our own understanding of what sustained peacebuilding requires." — Vera Al-Mawla

Theoretical Orientation: Dialogue as Relationship, Not Event

Our reading of cross-cultural dialogue draws on four complementary strands of peacebuilding scholarship, synthesized here rather than treated in turn. John Paul Lederach's relational account of conflict transformation holds that sustainable peace is produced not by agreements alone but by the slow accumulation of changed relationships, sustained over time and embedded in a place's social fabric; his later work on the "moral imagination" locates the capacity for constructive change in everyday, local practice rather than elite negotiation (Lederach 1997, 2005). Gordon Allport's contact hypothesis supplies the operational complement: prejudice between groups is reduced not by mere proximity but by structured contact under conditions of equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support (Allport 1954). Taken together, these two premises shape our starting assumption: dialogue is a disposition to be cultivated and re-cultivated, and the conditions of an encounter must be deliberately engineered rather than left to goodwill.

Séverine Autesserre's critique of internationally led peacebuilding sharpens this further, arguing that durable peace is built more through everyday, local interaction, habits, narratives, routine encounters, than through the macro-level interventions privileged by international actors and donors (Autesserre 2014). Writing from inside a small, village-based organization rather than observing one from outside, we take this as license to make visible the kind of "everyday peace" practice that rarely survives translation into a project report because it does not map cleanly onto a single indicator. Roger Mac Ginty's work on hybrid and everyday peace supplies a final, cautionary lens: peace in practice rarely conforms to the clean, liberal-institutional template assumed by international frameworks, but emerges instead through hybrid arrangements in which local custom, informal authority, and international norms interact, sometimes uneasily, to produce locally legitimate order (Mac Ginty 2011). This framing has kept us from importing dialogue methodologies wholesale from international templates without adapting them to North Bekaa's specific confessional, kinship, and political texture; the bilingual conceptual translation work described in Section 4 is, in effect, a hybridization exercise, reworking internationally codified categories until they function within, rather than against, the village's own normative vocabulary.

None of these four theorists, on their own, anticipated a small organization operating simultaneously as curriculum designer, crisis responder, and civil-society convenor. Our contribution, developed across the sections that follow, is to show what their combined premises look like when practiced under exactly those conditions.

Context: North Bekaa as a Borderland of Layered Vulnerability

Baalbek-Hermel, the governorate encompassing North Bekaa, has long ranked among Lebanon's most underserved regions in terms of state investment and access to services, a structural marginalization that predates the country's current crises by decades and has left the population's relationship to the central state mediated instead by informal networks, cross-border kinship and trade with Syria, and a patchwork of confessional and political affiliations. Proximity to the Syria-Lebanon border has meant the region has absorbed successive waves of displacement, first from Lebanon's own conflicts and then from the Syrian war, layering displaced and host populations within the same small towns, often through kinship ties that complicate any simple host-refugee binary.

We want to be precise about what this region has lived through, because precision matters to the communities we write about: this is a place that has experienced war repeatedly, not abstractly, including within the period this chapter covers. Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war left legacies, internal displacement, fragmented state authority, confessional power-sharing frozen rather than renegotiated, that continue to structure life in North Bekaa today, periodically reopened by political assassination. Between roughly 2014 and 2017, the spillover of the Syrian war brought direct confrontation with ISIS and other armed groups into Baalbek-Hermel itself; for North Bekaa, that was never a distant humanitarian emergency but a war that arrived at the edge of the villages where Peace of Art Lebanon works. Chronic political paralysis has corroded trust in state institutions across generations, pushing communities to rely on informal structures of authority and mutual aid, including organizations such as our own. The economic collapse that began in 2019, among the most severe globally in over a century by World Bank assessment, wiped out savings and pushed most of the population below the poverty line within a few years; the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the middle of that collapse, and the Beirut port explosion of August 2020, though physically concentrated in the capital, registered nationally as a further demonstration of the state's inability to protect its own citizens. Since 2024, a renewed war involving sustained Israeli strikes has reached Baalbek-Hermel directly; a November 2024 ceasefire has been violated on a near-daily basis since, alternating periods of calm

with sudden escalation, including strikes in the weeks immediately preceding this chapter's writing. The war is, at the time of writing, neither clearly over nor predictably active, chronically intermittent, close and recent enough that no programming calendar or child's sense of safety can be built on the assumption that calm, once achieved, will hold.

We set out this sequence because its cumulative, layered nature is itself analytically important, and too often lost in project documents that treat each shock as discrete and bounded. No single crisis in this list, civil war, assassination, border fighting, political deadlock, economic collapse, pandemic, port explosion, renewed war, has been allowed to fully resolve before the next arrived. Families in North Bekaa have therefore not experienced "a crisis" in the singular, recoverable sense assumed by humanitarian planning cycles, but a continuous, overlapping accumulation of harm spanning, for our youngest participants, the whole of their conscious lives. Trust, in institutions and in the predictability of daily life, has been depleted by a more sustained process than any single intervention can repair, and the reserves communities draw on to absorb one shock are, in North Bekaa, very often already spent before the next arrives. Programming that treats each phase of work as starting from a stable baseline is, in our experience, programming built on fiction.

It is within this context that Peace of Art Lebanon has built its programming logic around proximity rather than projection. The organization is structurally embedded in the villages it serves: its staff are residents, its institutional memory is the community's memory, and its credibility rests on continuity of presence through good periods and bad. This is not a claim we make abstractly: it is visible, for instance, in the fact that Kulluna Muwatinun facilitators are themselves former programme participants, and that WARD's founding members are organizations Peace of Art Lebanon has worked alongside, in various configurations, for the better part of a decade. Dialogue work led by outsiders can be paused or relocated when conditions deteriorate; dialogue work led by residents cannot be relocated, because the practitioners themselves have nowhere else to go, both the chief vulnerability and the chief asset of locally rooted peacebuilding organizations in protracted-crisis borderlands. Economic collapse has compounded this further by eroding the schools, health centres, and municipal services that might otherwise buffer displacement shocks, so that "peacebuilding" and "survival" are rarely analytically separable in practice, however cleanly formal project terminology distinguishes them. A civic education session on nonviolent communication cannot be insulated from the fact that some of the teenagers in the room lack reliable electricity, that the road to the session may pass through a checkpoint, or that the session itself may be interrupted by news of renewed strikes elsewhere. Designing

for this context has required us to treat resilience to interruption, the capacity of a curriculum, a partnership, or a relationship to survive being paused and resumed, sometimes repeatedly, as a first-order design consideration rather than an operational footnote.

Digital Storytelling as Civic Pedagogy: The Kulluna Muwatinun Programme

Kulluna Muwatinun, "We Are All Citizens", is implemented by Peace of Art Lebanon in partnership with PAX for Peace, the Dutch peace organization. Its current phase builds a digital storytelling capacity among youth, using video production as a vehicle for civic education across five interlinked domains: peacebuilding, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), nonviolent communication (NVC), the Youth, Peace and Security agenda (YPS), and citizenship. In developing this component, the team produced a bilingual master list of twenty-six core concepts across seven thematic categories, giving facilitators and youth a shared, accessible vocabulary for terms often treated, in formal civic education, as abstract or technical.

"We kept writing definitions that were correct and useless. A term could be legally precise and still land as nothing to a sixteen-year-old in Al-Fakiha. The breakthrough was always the same: stop explaining the concept, and ask the young people to make something that needed it." — Vera Al-Mawla, recalling on the curriculum's early drafts

The choice of digital storytelling as a pedagogical method is not incidental. Video production requires a sustained series of small, concrete decisions, whose story to tell, which images to use, how to sequence a narrative, what to leave out, that together constitute structured, cooperative contact closely aligned with Allport's conditions for prejudice reduction: participants from different confessional or displacement backgrounds occupy equal-status roles around a shared creative goal, with institutional support from facilitators trained in NVC and conflict-sensitive pedagogy. The civic concepts embedded in the curriculum are not delivered as lectures but encountered through the practical work of deciding how to represent them on screen, the cultivation of moral imagination through situated practice rather than abstract instruction (Lederach 2005).

The Youth, Peace and Security framework, formalized through UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015), recognizes young people as agents in peacebuilding rather than merely its beneficiaries. Kulluna Muwatinun operationalizes this structurally: youth participants produce media that circulates within their own communities, giving them narrative authorship over how peace, citizenship, and belief are

represented locally, authorship that matters in a region where national civic curricula are often perceived, not without justification, as distant from lived confessional and political realities.

The programme has evolved beyond classroom-based civic education into a wider ecosystem of experiential learning. As documented through Peace of Art's programme records, participants have engaged not only in leadership training but also structured debate workshops, stakeholder visits to municipal authorities, participatory research, round tables, and community social projects. These activities create multiple opportunities for repeated interaction between young people and public institutions, allowing civic learning to extend beyond workshop settings into local governance and community engagement. Furthermore, Peace of Art has served as a regional coaching partner supporting organizations across multiple countries in the region in adapting Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) approaches to their own contexts, illustrating how locally developed pedagogical practices can circulate across national settings rather than remaining confined to North Bekaa.

This is not a frictionless process. Terms like "freedom of religion or belief," carrying specific legal weight in international human rights discourse, do not map cleanly onto everyday Arabic usage in a multi-confessional rural setting, where religious identity is often inseparable from kinship, land, and political alignment. Considerable time in the programme's development went not into technical video production but into this conceptual translation work, finding language simultaneously faithful to the international framework, intelligible to a sixteen-year-old in Al-Fakiha, and not itself a source of confessional friction. This labour, largely invisible in formal project reporting, is, in our experience, the actual substance of cross-cultural dialogue work at the programme-design stage, before any encounter between participants takes place.

"One of the most difficult moments as a project manager was realizing that disagreement itself was not the problem. Young people were often willing to speak honestly; what they lacked was confidence that disagreement could occur without humiliation or exclusion. Our role gradually shifted from delivering training to protecting a space where difficult conversations could continue." — Mahdi Yahya.

Coordination as Dialogue Infrastructure: The WARD Network

In October 2025, Peace of Art Lebanon launched WARD, the Working Assembly for Rights and Dialogue, a civil society coordination platform that now brings together more than twenty-five civil society organizations, activists, and NGOs from across

Lebanon. Its founding rationale reflects a structural observation familiar to anyone working in Lebanese civil society: the country hosts a dense ecosystem of local and international NGOs, but coordination among them, particularly across confessional or geographic constituencies, remains thin, often limited to ad hoc information-sharing rather than sustained joint planning.

Even during its initial phase, the platform generated observable outputs beyond the establishment of the network itself. The inaugural assembly convened thirteen NGOs representing different regions of Lebanon, while subsequent expansion increased membership to more than twenty-five organizations. Early activities included joint newsletters, cross-organizational meetings, collaborative advocacy discussions, and coordination through broader civil society working groups. These outputs should not be interpreted as evidence that inter-organizational trust had been fully established; rather, they provide measurable indicators that repeated opportunities for institutional contact and collaboration were successfully created.

We position WARD as a dialogue intervention in its own right, even though conventional peacebuilding taxonomies rarely classify it that way, reserving "dialogue" for interventions involving direct interpersonal contact between conflict-affected individuals. That taxonomy is, in our view, too narrow. Coordination platforms bringing together organizational leadership from different confessional and geographic constituencies around shared operational problems, overlapping beneficiary lists, complementary service gaps, joint advocacy opportunities, produce exactly the kind of structured, equal-status, cooperative contact Allport identifies as conducive to reduced intergroup prejudice, except that the unit of contact is the organization rather than the individual. Civil society coordination, on this reading, is a meso-level analogue to interpersonal dialogue: it builds working trust between institutional actors who might otherwise interact only through competition for the same limited pool of resources.

The Network's inaugural newsletter, produced shortly after its October 2025 launch, was deliberately designed to model the cross-organizational visibility the platform seeks to build, profiling multiple member organizations side by side regardless of denominational or political base within a single shared communications product. In a media environment where civil society visibility is itself often filtered through confessional or political channels, co-presenting diverse organizations as equally legitimate, equally newsworthy actors is not a neutral editorial choice, it is itself a small act of cross-cultural dialogue practice.

It is worth being candid about the limits of this work. A platform bringing organizations together across confessional and political lines does not, on its own,

resolve the underlying competition for scarce resources that often structures relationships between Lebanese civil society actors more powerfully than any shared commitment to coordination. WARD's early experience confirms what the broader coordination literature would predict: trust between organizations builds incrementally, through repeated small acts of reciprocity, a beneficiary referral, a co-signed statement, covering a partner's session during a security closure, rather than through the platform's formal existence alone. The infrastructure creates the conditions for accumulated reciprocity; it does not substitute for it.

Heritage as Bridge: The Woven Memory of Fakiha

The Woven Memory of Fakiha is a heritage documentation initiative, under our project "Weaving Resilience" recording the carpet-weaving tradition of Fakiha village, a craft historically practiced by women across generations and increasingly at risk as younger generations migrate toward urban centres or abroad. The resulting catalogue documents techniques, patterns, and oral histories, situating the craft within the village's broader economic and cultural life.

Heritage documentation of this kind occupies a distinctive position within cross-cultural dialogue practice because its primary axis of bridging is generational and gendered rather than confessional or political. The tradition is held disproportionately in the embodied knowledge of older women, knowledge at acute risk of loss not through deliberate erasure but through the ordinary attrition of migration, economic pressure, and time. Elise Boulding's notion of a "culture of peace," sustained through cultivated practices, narratives, and intergenerational transmission rather than the absence of violence alone, is a useful frame here (Boulding, 2000): documenting and re-circulating a craft tradition strengthens exactly the intergenerational connective tissue, between grandmothers and granddaughters, between a village's past and its imagined future, that protracted crisis and out-migration steadily erode.

The project also functions as a vehicle for economic empowerment, complementing parallel work undertaken with UNESCO on the documentation and safeguarding of Fakiha's weaving heritage (further details on our website). Cultural documentation and livelihood support are conceived here as mutually reinforcing: a craft that generates income is more likely to be transmitted to the next generation than one preserved only in an archive. The Woven Memory of Fakiha therefore resists a purely commemorative framing of heritage, heritage as something looked back upon, in favour of a generative one, in which documentation is the first step

toward making a living tradition economically viable, and therefore more likely to remain a living tradition at all.

Beyond documentation, the initiative incorporated practical training workshops for women between the ages of eighteen and fifty, combining heritage preservation with skills development and livelihood opportunities. Workshop activities focused on traditional carpet-making techniques, local symbolism, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge, providing observable indicators of participation alongside the project's broader cultural objectives.

Although the initiative predates the explicit articulation of the four-stage framework in Section 8, its design followed the same underlying logic: context mapping to determine which weavers, techniques, and family histories carried village-level sensitivity before any recording began; participatory co-design in letting weavers themselves decide what could be documented publicly and what remained private knowledge; and structured, equal-status contact in the intergenerational pairing built into the training sessions themselves. Read retrospectively, the project is less an exception to the methodology than one of the experiences from which it was distilled.

"Working alongside women documenting traditional weaving reminded me that heritage is carried less through objects than through relationships. Every conversation about a pattern or a technique became a conversation about memory, identity, and belonging. I began to understand heritage preservation as another form of dialogue. And as a young woman coming from this context myself, I could relate to how these forms of dialogue shape a window for us to access opportunities where we could honestly reflect and share and amplify our identities, our stories... especially in underprivileged contexts." — Vera Al-Mawla.

Dialogue Under Duress: Programming Through War and Displacement

No account of peacebuilding practice in North Bekaa over the past several years can responsibly omit the experience of operating through actual war and mass displacement. At various points since 2024, Peace of Art Lebanon's programming has required a rapid shift from longer-term civic education toward emergency response, as the renewed Israeli campaign and its near-daily ceasefire violations displaced families in waves that have continued, on and off, into the period in which this chapter is written. The shift was neither smooth nor planned in advance; it was,

like much of the organization's history, an adaptive response to conditions that left little room for deliberation.

The toll is not adequately captured by displacement figures alone, significant as those are. It includes the loss of homes and, in some periods, of family members and neighbours; the destruction of agricultural land and livelihoods in a region where farming remains a primary income source; the disruption, more than once, of an entire school year for children who had already lost instructional time to the pandemic and economic collapse; and a more diffuse erosion of any sense that calm, once it arrives, can be trusted to last. We have observed this last effect directly: youth participants who, in calmer periods, engage readily in the forward-looking work Kulluna Muwatinun is built around become visibly more guarded and less willing to commit to multi-session activities during periods of renewed strikes, even distant ones. Planning a six-week storytelling curriculum means something different to a sixteen-year-old who has already watched two "normal" periods collapse without warning than it does to a designer working from a stable external timeline.

"The most difficult lesson came during periods of renewed violence. We had designed programmes assuming continuity, yet communities were living through interruption. Instead of asking how to keep projects on schedule, we learned to ask how relationships could survive disruption. That shift changed our understanding of peacebuilding more than any single training methodology." — Mahdi Yahya

We want to resist two easy narratives about this period: that the pivot to emergency response was a temporary interruption of the "real" dialogue work, to be resumed once conditions normalized; or that emergency response was itself dialogue practice by definition, simply because it involved cross-confessional, cross-displacement-status assistance. Neither captures what actually happened. What we observed instead was that the relational capital accumulated through years of prior dialogue and civic programming, trust built through Kulluna Muwatinun's youth cohorts, institutional relationships built through WARD, credibility built through sustained presence in the villages, became the very infrastructure which appeared to facilitate the delivery of emergency response by providing pre-existing channels of communication and trust. Displaced families were received, in part, into networks of trust built years earlier for an entirely different purpose. We record this not to claim credit for foresight, none of the three initiatives was designed with emergency response in mind, but because the alternative conclusion, that

relational capital built for one purpose cannot be redirected to another, is not what our experience supports.

This aligns with Lederach's argument that peacebuilding capacity is cumulative rather than project-bound: relationships built through one cycle of programming become the latent infrastructure available when the next, unanticipated crisis arrives (Lederach, 1997). It lends empirical weight, too, to Autesserre's claim that the everyday, accumulated social fabric of a place, rather than any single intervention, determines whether a community can absorb shock without fracturing further along existing lines of division (Autesserre, 2014). For an organization like ours, the practical implication is that dialogue and civic programming should be evaluated not only against their own stated objectives, but against their latent function as a reserve of relational capacity for crises that have not yet occurred, a function now tested repeatedly rather than hypothetically.

A further dimension of this period deserves mention: our own communications and advocacy work during it. Contributing a podcast episode to the Peace Corner Podcast platform and a script for a 2026 protection campaign addressing threats faced by young peacebuilders required articulating, in a more public register, lessons that had until then circulated only internally as field experience. Translating lived, often improvised crisis response into rigorous, non-sentimental advocacy language, resisting both bureaucratic flattening and emotive appeal, proved to be its own form of cross-cultural translation: rendering a specific North Bekaa experience legible to an international peacebuilding audience without losing its specificity. This illustrates a further, often unacknowledged layer of dialogue practice: dialogue not only across confessional or generational lines within a community, but across the register of local field experience and that of international policy discourse, each with its own vocabulary, evidentiary expectations, and audience.

Not every dialogue objective proved equally achievable. Maintaining continuity of participation during periods of intensified conflict remained difficult despite careful planning. Some youth who participated enthusiastically during periods of relative stability became unable or unwilling to commit to multi-session activities once security deteriorated, reflecting the practical limits of programme continuity under conditions of displacement and repeated violence. Similarly, although WARD created new opportunities for coordination, competition for limited funding among Lebanese civil society organizations did not disappear simply because a collaborative platform existed. Nor did heritage initiatives automatically attract

younger generations, whose migration, educational commitments, and economic pressures continued to challenge long-term transmission of traditional practices. These experiences reinforced a practical lesson: dialogue methodologies can create conditions conducive to cooperation, but they cannot eliminate the structural political and economic constraints within which communities continue to operate.

Methodology in Practice: A Four-Stage Framework for Cross-Cultural Dialogue Programming

The framework presented below was not designed prospectively as a formal research protocol. Rather, it emerged inductively through comparative reflection across multiple programmes implemented between 2016 and 2026, each addressing different thematic priorities but encountering similar operational challenges. The stages therefore represent an analytical synthesis of organizational practice rather than a prescriptive model developed independently of implementation experience.

The preceding sections describe what Peace of Art Lebanon's cross-cultural dialogue work has produced, curricula, networks, an archive of a craft tradition, and the theoretical commitments informing it. This section turns to a question we are asked more often by fellow practitioners than by academic reviewers: concretely, how is it done? Across Kulluna Muwatinun, WARD, and The Woven Memory of Fakiha, despite differing thematic content, a recurring four-stage methodological sequence has, with adaptation, structured each initiative. We present it not as a rigid model but as a practical, transferable framework other organizations in comparable protracted-crisis, multi-confessional settings may find useful to adapt.

Stage 1: Conflict-Sensitive Context Mapping

Before any curriculum, platform, or documentation initiative is designed, we conduct a structured mapping exercise covering three layers: the confessional and political fault lines relevant to the specific village or cluster of villages; the existing informal authority structures (municipal councils, religious leaders, mukhtars, influential families) whose tacit endorsement or opposition can determine whether an activity is locally viable; and the displacement and livelihood profile of the target population, including the proportion of displaced versus host-community participants and the economic pressures likely to affect attendance and retention. This mapping is conducted through short, semi-structured conversations with a deliberately diverse set of local interlocutors rather than a single formal survey, on the premise that confessionally or politically sensitive information is rarely

volunteered accurately in a standardized questionnaire in this context. The practical output is a one- to two-page internal risk-and-opportunity brief per village, updated whenever conditions shift materially, a security closure, a new displacement wave, a change in local leadership, rather than fixed once at project start-up.

Stage 2: Participatory Co-Design

Curriculum and platform content is never finalized before the people who will use it have shaped it. In Kulluna Muwatinun, this took the form of iterative co-design workshops with youth participants to develop and pressure-test the bilingual conceptual vocabulary before it was locked into the final twenty-six-concept list: draft definitions were tested verbally with small mixed groups, revised where terms produced confusion or discomfort, and only then incorporated into the written curriculum. The same logic shaped The Woven Memory of Fakiha, where weavers themselves determined which techniques, stories, and patterns were appropriate to document publicly and which were private family or village knowledge, a boundary an externally designed documentation protocol would have been unlikely to anticipate. The practical instrument here is simple but, in our experience, frequently skipped under external timeline pressure: a minimum of two rounds of participatory review built explicitly into the project workplan and budget, not treated as an optional extension.

Stage 3: Structured, Equal-Status Contact

Drawing directly on Allport's conditions for effective intergroup contact, every dialogue-bearing activity is built around a shared, cooperative production task rather than open-ended discussion alone (Allport, 1954). In practice: facilitators are paired across confessional or geographic background wherever feasible, so no single facilitator is seen as representing only one community; small working groups for any joint task, a short film, a mapped village timeline, a documentation interview, are composed to ensure no group is dominated by participants from a single background; and every session includes an explicit, named cooperative goal, a product to be finished by session's end, rather than an unstructured dialogue circle, which our field experience suggests is more vulnerable to domination by the most confident or senior participants present. Facilitators are trained in basic nonviolent communication so that disagreements surfacing during joint production can be named and processed in the moment rather than suppressed to finish the task.

Stage 4: Adaptive Monitoring and Crisis-Resilience Protocols

Standard project logframes, built around fixed indicators and timelines, are poorly suited to a context where activities may pause for weeks without warning. In response, we track two parallel sets of indicators: the conventional output and outcome set required for formal reporting, and, tracked internally regardless of that requirement, a lightweight set of relational indicators, whether named cross-confessional contact pairs from previous cohorts remain in touch six months on, whether WARD partner organizations have initiated unprompted collaboration outside the platform's formal activities, whether displaced families have been received into existing village networks built through prior programming during a new displacement event. Every activity plan also includes a written pause-and-resume protocol agreed with participants and partners in advance: what minimal communication will be maintained during an interruption, who checks in with participants during a pause, and the criteria for judging it safe to resume. This protocol, more than any single curriculum decision, is what determines whether trust built over a programme cycle survives an interruption intact or has to be rebuilt from scratch.

Tab. 1: Adaptive Monitoring

Stage	Core Question	Practical Instrument	Indicator of Success
1. Context Mapping	Who holds influence, and what divides this community right now?	Short internal risk-and-opportunity brief, updated on material change	No activity launched without local interlocutor sign-off
2. Participatory Co-Design	Does the content reflect participants' own boundaries and vocabulary?	Minimum two budgeted rounds of participatory review	Content revised, not merely approved, after review
3. Equal-Status Contact	Is the encounter structured to prevent dominance by one group?	Cross-background facilitator pairing; named joint production task per session	Mixed-background groups complete shared product together
4. Adaptive Monitoring	Will trust survive an unplanned interruption?	Written pause-and-resume protocol; relational indicators tracked alongside logframe	Contact and trust persist after a crisis pause

From this accumulated methodological experience, we offer the following transferable, action-oriented recommendations to practitioners and donors working in comparable protracted-crisis, multi-confessional settings:

- Budget and schedule for interruption from the outset. Build pause-and-resume protocols and contingency timelines into the original workplan and budget rather than treating disruption as an unforeseeable exception requiring a no-cost extension after the fact.
- Fund the translation work, not only the content. Allocate dedicated time and budget to bilingual conceptual translation and participatory review; this is substantive technical work, not a pre-implementation formality, and frequently the difference between a curriculum that lands and one quietly ignored.
- Design contact around shared production, not discussion alone. Anchor cross-group encounters in a concrete, finishable joint task rather than an open dialogue format, and pair facilitators deliberately across the lines the activity is meant to bridge.
- Track relational indicators alongside standard logframes. Maintain a lightweight, internally owned set of trust and contact indicators that persist across project cycles and donors, since the relational capital they measure routinely outlives any single grant.
- Treat civil society coordination as dialogue infrastructure in its own right, and resource it accordingly, rather than as an unfunded extra expected of already over-stretched local organizations.
- Recognize and credential the multi-role competency of local practitioners. Donors and academic institutions alike should develop pathways to formally recognize the layered technical, facilitative, and managerial skill sets locally embedded practitioners accumulate, rather than assuming such competencies require separate, externally delivered training.
- Build flexibility into budget allocation itself, not only into timelines. Beyond scheduling for interruption, project budgets should allow a margin that can be redirected toward new, urgent activities that still serve the overall goal of the project, so that a programme can be adapted in real time to changing circumstances rather than waiting on a formal amendment process.

Reflections from the Field: What Carrying Multiple Hats Teaches About Dialogue

A structural feature of small, rurally based NGOs such as Peace of Art Lebanon, rarely addressed directly in the peacebuilding literature, is that the same individuals move across multiple functional roles, programme design, field

facilitation, grant writing, monitoring and evaluation, organizational communications, direct community engagement, often within the same week, sometimes the same day. This is usually treated, when discussed at all, as a resource constraint: a symptom of insufficient funding for adequately staffed teams. We do not dispute that reading, but we want to suggest, from direct experience, that this structural condition also produces a distinctive epistemic vantage point on cross-cultural dialogue worth naming.

When the person designing a dialogue curriculum is the same person who will sit in the room facilitating it, who will later write the report accounting for its outcomes, and who will field the late-night call from a participant's family during a displacement crisis, the gap between dialogue as designed and dialogue as lived closes considerably. Theoretical commitments about equal-status contact or moral imagination are tested not in the abstract but against the concrete, often inconvenient texture of a specific village, a specific family's history, a specific funding deadline. This proximity carries costs, among them, the difficulty of maintaining clear boundaries between professional and personal life where colleagues, beneficiaries, and neighbours are frequently the same people, but it also carries an epistemic advantage that more compartmentalized structures may lack: the impossibility of mistaking a well-designed curriculum for an automatically successful intervention, because the same person who designed it also has to watch, in real time, whether it actually works. We flag this less as a grievance than as a methodological observation: any framework for evaluating cross-cultural dialogue practice that assumes a clean separation between the person who designs an intervention and the person who lives with its consequences will, in settings like ours, systematically misdescribe how the work is actually done.

This vantage point deserves more sustained theoretical attention than it currently receives within the cross-cultural dialogue literature, which has tended to privilege either the perspective of international programme evaluators or that of dialogue participants themselves, with comparatively little written from the position of the local practitioner who occupies both design and delivery roles simultaneously, across a sustained, multi-year trajectory rather than a single project cycle.

This same proximity is, we suspect, partly why practitioners in settings like ours often find it difficult to render their own competence legible to formal academic or credentialing structures, even after years of substantive, technically demanding work. Skills developed through this kind of layered practice, conflict-sensitive curriculum design, bilingual conceptual translation, compliance and reporting work, crisis-adaptive project management, cross-organizational coordination,

rarely map onto the discrete course units of a conventional academic transcript, even though their cumulative sophistication may exceed what a transcript alone could suggest. One of us has spent considerable effort in parallel to this chapter's writing on exactly this problem: seeking formal academic validation, within a Lebanese university informatics programme, for years of applied technical and organizational experience accumulated through Peace of Art Lebanon's work. That process is, in its own modest way, a further illustration of the chapter's central argument, that the competencies built through sustained, multi-role, locally embedded peacebuilding practice are real and rigorous, and nonetheless frequently invisible to the institutional frameworks, academic or institutional alike, meant to recognize and credential them.

Conclusion: Dialogue as Organizational Disposition

We have argued that, in a protracted-crisis borderland such as North Bekaa, cross-cultural dialogue is best understood not as a discrete activity bounded by a project's logframe but as an accumulated organizational disposition, built through digital storytelling curricula, civil society coordination infrastructure, and heritage documentation, and tested, unexpectedly but repeatedly, by the demands of emergency response. None of the initiatives described here, Kulluna Muwatinun, the WARD Network, The Woven Memory of Fakiha, was designed in isolation as a freestanding dialogue project. Their cumulative effect has been to build and rebuild, across confessional, generational, and institutional lines, the relational and cultural infrastructure that Lederach and Autesserre, from different theoretical vantage points, each identified as the substrate of durable peace.

We do not claim this organizational model transfers wholesale to every conflict-affected context; Transferability should be understood as adaptation of design principles rather than replication of programming models. North Bekaa's confessional composition, border proximity, displacement history, and dense kinship networks are highly specific. What appears transferable, we suggest, are the underlying design principles distilled in Section 8: equal-status contact organized around shared production rather than dialogue alone, participatory design grounded in local vocabulary, and monitoring that anticipates interruption rather than assumes continuity, wherever chronic instability and weak state presence obtain. Peace of Art's own trajectory offers preliminary support for this proposition. Practices originally developed within North Bekaa have since informed regional coaching activities supporting partner organizations across multiple countries in the region, suggesting that elements of the methodology travel when adapted to local conditions rather than mechanically replicated.

The structural reality of small, locally rooted organizations, in which the same practitioners design, deliver, and live alongside the consequences of their own dialogue interventions, constitutes not merely a resource constraint to be lamented but a distinctive, currently under-theorized vantage point on what cross-cultural dialogue actually requires, methodologically, not only culturally, to take root in places that cannot be left once the funding cycle ends.

What this chapter ultimately offers, beyond three organizational case studies, is a claim about method: that locally rooted institutions build cross-cultural dialogue not project by project, but through the slow, deliberate accumulation of relational infrastructure, infrastructure that reveals its full value precisely when crisis arrives and everything else stops.

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