

16 X 16 BLOG SERIES

Why innovative grassroots approaches matter to build inclusive peace

Sihem Nasraoui, Peace Lab; 16 x 16 participant.

Our peacebuilding organization, [Peace Lab](#) was created in January 2017 as the first educational incubator in schools in the four regions (Kasserine, Sidi Bouzid, Sejnane and Mednine) most affected by terrorist brainwash and lack of a proper education curricula. I was the focal point of Peace Lab Kasserine. Peace Lab is one of the few organizations, which challenged the odds by bringing innovative solutions to complex social issues that hindered youth creativity and emancipation in Tunisia.

Sitting, brainstorming, traveling and learning helped us think not only out of the box but out of all pre-designed frames and systems. In Peace Lab we have managed to free ourselves as young leaders and changemakers from the social norms be it gender based, historical processes or sociopolitical backgrounds. As a team coming from different backgrounds, faith, and both education and professional level with a focus on empirical design of strategies that could empower youth in vulnerable communities. We have changed the way policy-makers approach social issues like unemployment, violent extremism, hate speech etc. We managed to achieve that through our diverse projects and initiatives by addressing the push and pull factors of radicalization through our debate sessions, meeting both private and public stakeholders and mobilizing youth who are usually repulsive towards civic engagement, in the public scene when it comes to building peace and resilience. We can focus on this aspect by sharing our mind-teasing strategies during the different UN discussion and Training-of-Trainers sessions to enable other participants to discover ways to overcome their limits and expand to a more innovative approach that believes in its priceless assets but yet knows its weaknesses and how to heal from within to the outside.

We often correlate innovation with craziness and an idealism far from reality but the truth that we want to share is that the current issues need a touch of idealism, hope, and passion. This potion helped train our beneficiaries to be crazy enough



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to believe in themselves and fight against their inner vulnerability factors.

We have researched the causes of radicalization and we have found that youth are keen for not only getting a job but also capturing a sense of belonging and self-esteem. As an example, we have started our entrepreneurship driven initiative that offered both training and inter-faith dialogue in the target remote areas. Our Unleash Tunisia Venture Bus approach grounded on innovation did not only bring the idea of providing jobs but believed in an innovative narrative where principles like creativity and mind changing games can break with the old and classical and promote more inclusive approaches that offers empathy, both hope and a solid identity to be celebrated as a legacy.



Unleash Tunisia Venture Bus. Credits: Young Leaders Entrepreneurs

Innovation for us was and still is a mix of fantasy, a holistic reading and a commitment that we want to explain and speak about as part of [UNDP 16 x 16 Initiative](#). Unfortunately, we have seen how ready projects with big funding often wrap their ideas with fanciness, thinking that innovation equals pricy venues or complex structures. For us, innovation is the raw material that triggers the youthful perks of joy and sparkling impact seen in the beneficiaries' eyes and souls. It is more about setting a new legacy rooted

For more information on,

- 16 x 16 participants: <https://www.youth4peace.info/node/324>
- 16 x 16 Initiative: <https://www.youth4peace.info/node/344>

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and driven by resilience and peacebuilding among the project beneficiaries.



Sihem at a workshop for young entrepreneurs. Credits: Young Leaders Entrepreneurs

We are passionate and looking forward to offering a perspective about diversity and cultural sensitivity which are considered as canons and foundations of successful and inclusive solutions especially in fighting violent extremism. Coming from an Arab, Muslim, Berber heritage and French colonization we have seen throughout our operation in many vulnerable communities in the borders of Tunisia how talking a direct peace narrative can be offensive. As an example, throughout our Peace Lab project, we have visited Sidi Ben Aoun which is one of the hotbeds of radicalized youth. We have been instructed by local youth leaders and friends not to mention peace or radicalization. If we do, the local community members will assume that we are stigmatizing them as terrorists and us as "Heroes" coming our way from an Anglophone and privileged society with white traits to transform them into peaceful civilized citizens. Our lively examples helped us understand the complexity of the target audience, analyze the society in terms of gender, race, color, region, religiosity, education etc. Such matrix will ensure that our local peace leaders and ambassadors will be empowered enough to frame even linguistically their words and build on the existent legacy of what makes that community proud, i.e. the community's arts, cuisine, generosity and oral poetry that is passed from one generation to another. Cultural sensitivity does not mean ignoring that the community has issues; it is more about building trust and training local citizens to lead the process of discussing the issue and designing the solution. We did that and this decentralized and bottom-up change worked. As observers, we supported internally but we respected the traditions and made sure we were not there to destroy their legacy. We respected their difference and only fought the culprit, not the assets that were inherited through generations.

We do recommend to NGOs to strengthen their ways of sustaining a grassroots driven idea model. It will be of high importance to get inspiration from similar ideas to accumulate innovation and replicate them. Not to forget the priceless change of immersing in debates and rich discussions that can lead to partnerships and coalitions bringing the best out of their initiatives, and ideas. We have seen that before which helped boost the mobilization efforts of bringing more youth to the peace talks and peacebuilding efforts as well as keeping efforts under the public and private stakeholders' umbrella. Having maybe the youngest board members, we believe whole-heartedly that grassroots should not be placed in projects as a mere tokenism but to be for real implicated to take up leadership roles whether during the various training or debate sessions but also when it comes to policies design.

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