



Under the theme "Love of God, and love of Neighbors"

Better World Organization for Community Development

Celebrated World Interfaith Harmony Week; 1-7 February, 2018; Duhok city, Kurdistan Region of Iraq



Introduction:

Better World Organization for Community Development (BWOD) was established by a group of youth from different religions in May 2017 to develop the community in Duhok province, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) through peace promotion projects. Having people from different religions and ethnical groups living together in Iraq requires peace building programs to bring them together to accept each other and create harmony among them.

The World Interfaith Harmony declaration is one of the most successful initiatives because this declaration encourages civil society organizations and governmental institutions to celebrate harmony among the people of different religions and advocate for peace and coexistence which all the communities in the world demand.

Better World organization coordinated with relevant governmental institutions representing three main religions (Islam, Christianity and Yazidi) in KRI to be part of the activities implemented during World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW). Moreover, it created an Interfaith Harmony Group of 20 young members from the three religions. The group participated in a 1-day workshop on "World Interfaith Harmony Week Declaration" and in different activities celebrating the declaration. It is worth mentioning that the group has a

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diversity of people who are not only different in religion but also represent a combination of refugees, IDPs and host community members. The activities of this anniversary included awareness of the communities engaging women, youth, religious and community leaders, and children. They were implemented in different locations, such as public places, schools, university, private houses, and cafes.

It is also to be noted that this is first time World Interfaith Harmony Week is celebrated in KRI; it has received good acceptance and responsiveness from the communities. The feedbacks from the community members and leaders were very positive; they trust that such activities could bring harmony back to the different religions and ethnic groups after it was lost as a result of continuous conflicts and wars that overrun the country for decades.

Context:

There is a diversity of religions and ethnic groups in Iraq. There are historical conflicts and wars happened in this country where many people lost their lives and the negative effects are obvious to the present time. Political, religious, economical and geographical conflicts are alive and continuous in Iraq and are even more sever, recently after the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) appearance. The ISIS conflict created negative tensions among Muslims, Yazides and Christians people while they were living together in peace for ages. ISIS fighters cut off the chain of trust among the religious groups in Iraq as they killed Iraqi citizens especially Yazidies in massive, kidnapped and/or rapped women and children, and committed many other atrocities in the name of Islam.

Nevertheless, Muslims, Yazidies, and Christians will still live together because they share one homeland. They only need to rebuild the harmony among each other and show to the terrorist groups that no religion call for violence and that all of them share the love of good and neighbors.

That is why, Better World organization celebrated World Interfaith Harmony week to re-open the door of harmony by inviting groups of people with different religions to advocate for delivering peace messages and re-establishing the co-existence in Iraq.

Objectives:

- To create awareness of the community on UN declaration of 'World Interfaith Harmony Week ',



- To establish Interfaith Harmony group which engages youths of different religions and enables it to work on peace activities that advocate harmony among the religions,
- To encourage related governmental and other related sectors to celebrate the declaration WIHW in the next years and develop programs which advocate harmony,
- To build natural links among the three religions through planting trees in three religious places (a mosque, a Yazidian Marqad, and a church),
- To create Interfaith Harmony Network in Kurdistan region which brings religious leaders to work and concentrate on the common good points among religions and advocate for that through different activities in the community.

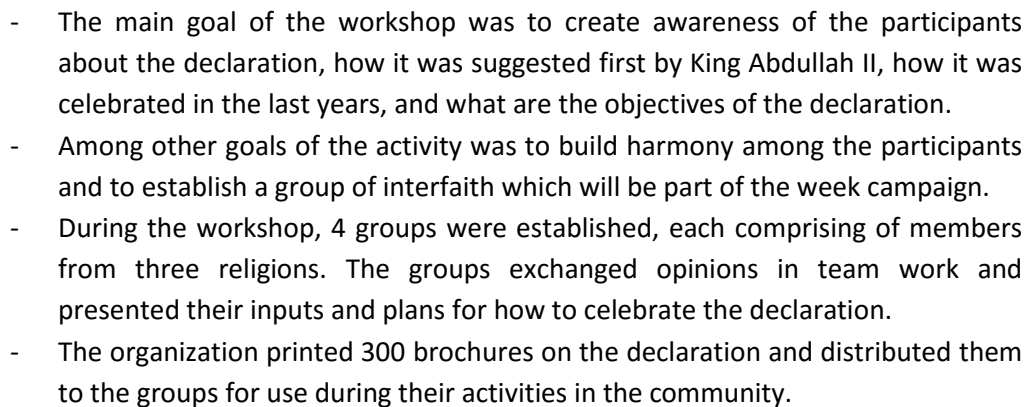
World Interfaith Harmony Week Campaign 1-7 February, 2018



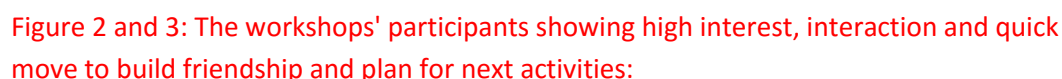
Activities implemented:

1. Team building and advocacy for UN Declaration on World Interfaith Harmony Week:

- On 1st of February, Better World Organization invited 20 female and male youths within the age range of 20-30 from three religions (Christianity, Islam and Yazidi) to a brief workshop on World Interfaith Harmony Week UN declaration.



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F.3



A short video in the link shows the good interaction of the participants:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3_zORs60sE&t=14s&app=desktop

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2. Interfaith Harmony Awareness campaign in the communities through outreach activities:

- **2nd February;** the groups' members started awareness campaign in the communities through outreach activities in different places. Some of the members visited people in the refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps distributed the brochures and some other members doing the same in the host community. While some members invited friends to cafes to get together, have snacks, and discuss the declaration through their entertainment time. One of the members invited friends to her house and discussed World Interfaith Harmony Week. In addition, some members created special groups through Mobile applications, generated discussions on the declaration and exchanged ideas how to reach more people and separate the Harmony among people.

Figures 4 to 7 show Groups gathering and discussing WIHW UN declaration

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3. Building natural links among three religions through planting trees in three religious places:

- **3rd February**; BWOC D team and the 20 young participants from the three religions visited together three religious places (Yazidian Shekh Hassan Marqad, Dara Barani Church, and Forqan Mosque) in Duhok and planted trees, 15 in each place. The objective of the activity was to establish natural links among three religions by planting trees. The activity proceeded in a good way meeting the intended objective. Actually, this was the first time for many participants to visit a religious place that is not related to their religion. All the participants felt the harmony and how we have to accept each other despite of any differences.
- The Harmony Journey of planting trees lasted for 8 hours (9:00 AM -3:00 PM).
- The first religious place visited was Yazidain Shekh Hassan Marqad in Shariya, a town with Yezidie dominant population, located within the Duhok Governorate the south of Duhok city. A group of religious people from Yazidi religion were present as well; they were very happy of the activity and encouraged us to do such activities regularly.
- The second place visited was Forqan Mosque in Duhok city where the same group actively participated in planting trees and many of the Christians and Yazidies members enjoyed visiting Mosque for the first time.



- Final place visited was Dara Barani Church in Duhok city, the oldest Christian church in the city. We had been welcomed by the clergy man and accompanied us during our activity and showed his interest and appreciation to such activity.
- The culmination of the planting trees journey was a traditional Kurdish banquet for all members of the group which we called "Harmony lunch together", on one table, to break the existing prejudices in the different religions regarding sharing one catering table and food. Thus enjoying nice time together where each member of the group served each other.

Figures 8 and 9 show planting trees activity in Yazidian religious place in Shariya:

F.8



F.9



Figures 10 and 11 show planting trees activity in Forqan Mousqe in Duhok city:

F.10



F.11



Figures 12 and 13 show planting trees activity in Dara Barani Church in Duhok city:

F.12



F.13



Figure 14 shows the Harmony lunch activity in 3rd February:

F.14





Al-Jazeera satellite channel presented report on the planting trees activity (you may find it through this link

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWbiBnyqlxo&app=desktop>

In addition the other video created by organization team as in the link below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZ8gzl7U11Q>

4. Presentations on Peace and Coexistence and a harmony lunch:

- On 4th February; the organization delivered a presentation on peace and coexistence for religious and community leaders. Three scholars from the three religions have been requested to conduct presentation on peace and coexistence in their religions.
- The invited participants totaling 50 persons of both gender also included representatives from different governmental, civil society and other agencies as listed below:
 1. Directorate of Islamic Affairs
 2. Directorate of Christianity Affairs
 3. Directorate of Yazidi Affairs
 4. 2 members of Kurdistan Parliament
 5. 2 members from Governorate Council
 6. A number of Duhok University Lecturers
 7. NPA (Norwegian People Aid)
 8. UNDP
 9. Rawanga Foundation (Local)
 10. Internal Peace Movement
 11. Harikar Local NGO
 12. Lalish Center Duhok (Special center of Yazidi religion)

In addition, the interfaith harmony group of 20 youths also participated in the event.

- Initially, the organization director explained the UN declaration on **WIHW**, its establishment background and objectives, and also the successful experience of Jordan movement of the common word. It was followed by scholars' presentations (each for 20 minutes) on Peace and coexistence for the attendees.
- Following that, 1-hour open fruitful discussions took place among the participants and the scholars. All attendees presented their ideas on how we to develop the idea of interfaith harmony in the community in wider perspectives. .



- A parliament member reported her evaluation of the overall activity and expressed her positive feedback. Moreover, she encouraged Better World organization to submit an official letter to Kurdistan Parliament to assign a national day of WIHW that all the related governmental and other agencies celebrate the WIHW in next years. Thus Better World has submitted an official letter to Kurdistan Regional House of parliament
- At the end of the event all the participants had a harmony lunch together.

Figure 15 to 20 show Presentations on Peace and Coexistence and a harmony lunch:

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F.20



F.21





An invited local TV channel (WAR) delivered a report (with translation to English) on the event (see the link below):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nQGYvKdGi4&t=31s>

In addition the other video created by organization team as in the link below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljmkFhWsAcc>

5. Awareness Raising in the University of Duhok and schools in Duhok through outreach and seminars:

- On 5th and 6th February; the interfaith harmony groups conducted awareness raising activities through outreach and seminars on World Interfaith Harmony Week for different group of students in a number of schools within Duhok governorate. Brochures developed for the event were distributed through the activities.
- 40 university students were interviewed through group discussions in individual talks. They were asked questions about the obstacles in the way of coexistence in KRI and how we could advocate for harmony through common goods among religions existing in the area.
- Three seminars on WIHW were held by the groups in two elementary schools and one high school (Bapira High School in Shariya, Darya elementary school in Shariya, and Zariland elementary school in Duhok). Each seminar was attended by more than 25 students.
- Also, three seminars on WIHW were conducted in Duhok University Psychology department. Each of these seminars had the attendance of more than 30 students who were very interested in the topics. It is worth mentioning that in a seminar two participant students, a Yazidi and a Muslim, who were previously in conflict with each other because of their religions worked together in the activity and were able to tolerate each other.

Figures 22 to 29 show the activities held in Schools and Duhok University:

F.22



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6. Presentations on three religions and common goods.

- On 7th February; we brought together the interfaith harmony group of 20 youth which consisted of four small groups; each group five members of different religion. This activity was conducted at the University of Duhok Culture center.
- The first group delivered a presentation on Christianity to enable all other group members have an overview of this religion, while the second group on Yazidism and the third one on Islam. The last group presented the common good among three religions. The goal of the activity was to educate the participants about the three religions, and focus on the common good among the three religions; in which we all know that there are sharing good points among us and we can be united in many common points. It was a very successful activity which all participants shared their ideas and suggestions.
- All the participants and the organization team discussed about the activities we conducted, and provided their feedbacks and suggestions for next projects and how we could advocate for harmony in our communities.
- At the end Better, World organization rewarded the interfaith harmony group with the certification of participation on WIHW project.



Figures 30 to 35 show the activities held in Schools and Duhok University:

F.30



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F.32



F.33





F.34



F.35





Quotes by participants:

- *"I felt happy to interact with people of different religions"*
- *"Such projects should be continuous in the community to create real harmony among people of different religions"*
- *"Planting trees activity made me happy and to feel the harmony"*
- *"The activities enhanced the knowledge about other religions"*
- *"The project created a new community without discrimination"*
- *"The project encouraged us to spread peace by our own ways"*
- *"The project helped me to accept others regardless of their religions"*
- *"The young people who participated in this project give me hope that the world is going to better"*
- *"Visiting religious places made me feel the harmony and gave me the hope that the coexistence is not impossible"*

Main results of the project:

1. Better World organization has submitted an official letter on **World Interfaith Harmony Week** to Kurdistan Parliament to be considered as a national day. It has been successfully considered and the parliament members has sign the plea and the decision is expected to be issued soon that the World interfaith Harmony Week is an official week for all governmental bodies and civic societies related to religions and peaceful existence to celebrate the World interfaith Harmony Week in Kurdistan Region of Iraq in next years. Kurdistan Parliament has awarded Better World Organization an appreciation Certificate for the submission of WIHW suggestion.
2. Establishment of Interfaith Harmony Network in Duhok-Kurdistan region of Iraq in which the three scholars from different religions who presented peace and coexistence presentation during our campaign; and the community leaders, and the members from Education department and University representative, departments of religion affairs of the three religions, members of governorate council and members of Kurdistan Parliament are members of this Network. The network is in the process of formation and the essential members are working to strengthen this network to be a means of peaceful interfaith coexisting among all different religions.

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