Environmental Peace Dialogue at the School for Peace, Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam

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1 Executive Summary

This report evaluates the second cohort of the School for Peace (SFP) dialogue course at Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, conducted between February 2025 and February 2026 in partnership with Citizens for the Environment. The evaluation and research project is funded by friends of Neve Sahlom/ what el Salam Switzerland (Schweizer Freundinnen und Freunde von Oase des Friedens). The course, funded by the Robert Bosch Foundation, brought together 19 participants, 10 Israeli Jews and 9 Palestinians, with the aim of exploring the integration of environmental activism and Israeli Palestinian dialogue. By the course's end, 16 participants remained.

The program unfolded under exceptionally difficult circumstances, during an active war and escalating regional tensions that profoundly shaped both the dialogue space and participants' experiences. Against this backdrop, the course became not only a site for dialogue and environmental learning, but a container for intense emotional, political, and existential realities.

Three key themes emerged from the evaluation. First, participants entered the process with sharply divergent expectations: Palestinian participants primarily sought recognition of their suffering and political reality and with hope to support one own society, while many Israeli Jewish participants arrived with hopes for personal and political connection, future-oriented dialogue. Second, despite moments of rupture, emotional strain, and two participant departures, the group demonstrated remarkable perseverance, it sustained in large part by the committed leadership of SFP Director Roi Silberberg. Third, the environmental activism component emerged as a pivotal turning point, with joint projects providing a concrete source of hope and connection that verbal dialogue alone had struggled to generate.

The evaluation concludes that collaborative action, such as working together on shared tasks, is the primary mechanism driving intergroup connection, with environmental issues serving as an effective and accessible entry point. These findings carry important implications for the design of future dialogue programs, particularly the value of embedding cooperative, action-oriented activities, that are not necessarily environmental in nature, alongside structured dialogue, even in contexts of acute conflict.

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Palestinian Israeli dialogues. She was a lecture and researcher at Kibbutzim College of Education, Ben Gurion University in the Negev, Israel, and the Head of the Peace Education Department at the United Nations University for Peace. On her personal capacity she's an activist promoting children rights and gender equality mainly in war affected areas.

2 Introduction

This report was the result of an evaluation of the School for Peace (SFP) dialogue course which took place from 1/2/25 to 1/2/26 at the School for Peace, Neve Shalom/ Wahat al-Salam in Israel and Palestine School for Peace and it is the second cohort in partnership with Citizens for the Environment. The dialogue course was facilitated by one Jewish facilitator and one Palestinian facilitator; the environmental component was organized by Citizens for the Environment team. At the beginning of the course, 19 participants had enrolled, of which 10 were Israeli Jews, and 9 Palestinians[1]. By the end of the course, 16 participants remained, out of which 9 Israeli Jews and 7 Palestinians. Throughout the report, Roi Silberberg, director of the School for Peace (SFP) Neve Shalom/ Wahat al-Salam is mentioned at different instances. He overviewed the course dialogue and was instrumental in offering insight into how the course went.

The course is funded by the Robert Bosch Foundation; it is the 8th cohort of the dialogue course. This research and evaluation project is funded by Friends of Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam Switzerland and set out with a relatively simple yet ambitious question: what might emerge when environmental discourse and the Israeli Palestinian dialogue process are intentionally brought together within one shared framework? More specifically, the project aimed to explore the advantages, disadvantages, and potential added value of integrating environmental activism with a dynamic dialogue process between Israeli Jewish and Palestinian participants. At the time the research was designed, the political and social atmosphere while never free of conflict and pain felt different, grief over people, communities and ideas were expressed openly. There was a sense that such an encounter might allow both fields to strengthen one another: that environmental activism could offer a shared, future-oriented platform, while dialogue practices could deepen mutual understanding and cooperation around environmental justice.

However, by the time the program was implemented, the context had shifted dramatically. The entire process unfolded during an active war, alongside escalating regional tensions including another active conflict and war with Iran. These extreme conditions inevitably shaped both the dialogue space and the experiences participants brought into it, the wars and ongoing atrocities affected daily social life for all communities. In Isreal and in Palestine-many dialogue and peace organizations were unable to operate during this period. Some organizations suspended their activities

[1] Palestinian and Arab would be used interchangeably and specifically in quotes from interviews.

entirely, others faced significant challenges in recruiting participants, while several shifted from binational engagement to primarily uni-national activities. The program therefore became not only a site for dialogue and environmental learning, but also a container for intense emotional, political, and existential realities.

From the outset, demand for the course was very high. Participants entered the program with strong expectations, though these expectations differed significantly between groups. Many Palestinian participants arrived with a profound need to be heard. They hoped space would allow them to express pain, anger, frustration, and grief, experiences tied both to past injustices and to the acute pressures and atrocities of the present moment. They sought recognition: a space where their suffering could be voiced, contained, and validated.

The Israeli Jewish participants arrived with a different set of expectations. Many held what Roi later has defined as “fantasies and hope”, a belief that open and honest conversation might lead toward a shared society or at least toward constructive, solution-oriented dialogue. In this sense, the expectations of the two groups reflect different temporal orientations. One group entered the process carrying urgent past and present realities: the other tended to focus more on present–future possibilities and visions of shared society or coexistence.

The environmental justice and environmental activism components were originally designed to be integrated throughout the dialogue process. The intention was that environmental issues of water, land, climate, and shared ecological systems might provide both concrete and symbolic ground for collaboration. Yet the implementation of this vision proved complex. The extreme challenge of external conditions further intensified tensions among staff members, which stemmed from political, interorganizational, and interpersonal dynamics. As a result, Roi played a major role in helping maintain relationships among the different actors. Ultimately, environmental programming and dialogue work became partially separated rather than fully integrated.

The research process itself also encountered unexpected challenges. The Palestinian researcher who had initially been involved in the project ultimately chose not to participate in the evaluation phase. In response, and in consultation with Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, we decided that Gal Harmat would conduct the interviews. Participants were offered the choice to speak in English, Hebrew, or Arabic, depending on their comfort and preference. In a manner reflecting the power structure, and in correlation with research and past experiences, all of the interviews were ultimately conducted in Hebrew.

The interviews themselves were emotionally demanding. Participants shared deep frustration, anger, disappointment, and at times of despair regarding the process. Listening to these narratives requires careful attention to both the personal and political layers of their experiences. At the same time, many participants also described moments of perseverance, connection and resilience mainly when taking part on the

environmental projects and at time when environmental activism was done together in Palestinian municipalities in Israel

This evaluation is therefore structured into three main parts, each grounded in both contextual analysis and the interview material collected from participants, the beginning and end of course evaluation questioners, facilitators, and program management (Roi). The chapters examine the following themes:

1. Expectations, hopes, and counter fantasies- exploring the initial motivations participants brought into the process and how these expectations shaped their experiences.

2. Perseverance, resilience, and “get through “which became a code to overcome major difficulties in challenges in the conversation with some of the participants and with Roi. This part also will describe how Roi, nearly single handedly, held the process together.

3. Environmental discourse and dialogue relationships, analyzing how environmental themes interacted with the dialogue process and whether they succeeded in creating new forms of connection or shared purpose.

Throughout this study, I attempt to remain attentive not only to the analytical questions of evaluation, but also to the lived experience of the participants and facilitators who inhabited this difficult space. The project began with the hope that environmental cooperation might open a new pathway for dialogue. What emerged instead was a far more complex story, one marked by pain, different expectations, political realities, and yet also moments of persistence and fragile connection.

On a personal note, conducting this research was, by far, the most difficult scholarly undertaking I have experienced. Engaging with the material required confronting not only the subject matter itself but also aspects of my own past that carry personal trauma. The process repeatedly unsettled the boundaries I had previously drawn between the personal and the academic, compelling me to reflect on how my lived experiences shaped the questions I ask, the interpretations I make, and the positions I take. Rather than remaining a purely analytical exercise, the project became an emotionally and politically demanding process of self-interrogation. Acknowledging this positionality is therefore essential, as the difficulty of the research was inseparable from the ways in which it intersected with my personal history, ethical commitments, and scholarly perspective.

3 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in the principles of peace and conflict studies, emphasizing the importance of context in understanding intergroup interactions. Data were collected through analysis of beginning and end of course questioners and semi-structured interviews with members of the Shared Future Project staff, as well as Palestinian and Jewish Israeli participants and the school for

peace manager. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to articulate personal experiences, emotions, and perceptions while ensuring that key thematic areas, such as expectations, hope, and engagement, were consistently explored. This approach supports an in-depth, context-sensitive analysis of dialogue processes and the ways in which participants navigate the political, social, and emotional dimensions of the conflict.

4 Expectations, Hopes, and "Counter-Fantasies"

Participants entered the dialogue process with different expectations, hopes, and imagined possibilities. A substantial body of scholarship on Israeli Palestinian dialogue has shown that participants often arrive with distinct motivations shaped by the asymmetrical political context of the conflict. Scholars such as Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Ifat Maoz note that Jewish Israeli participants frequently approach dialogue encounters with an emphasis on interpersonal understanding and coexistence, getting to know the Palestinians participants on a personal level "I expect to get to know the other side and to hear Arabic spoken" wrote one of the participants in the expectations questioner". Whereas Palestinian participants often seek recognition of their political reality and an opportunity to voice narratives that are marginalized in dominant discourse and in this course to "to gain knowledge and learn more from experience on the subject matter- the environment. These different expectations are closely tied to the unequal structural positions of the groups within the conflict and frequently shape both the dynamics of dialogue and the meanings participants attribute to it.

During the war, however, these expectations became even more complex. Several Jewish Israeli participants described entering the dialogue space with a strong need to express their own pain and to have their experiences recognized by Palestinian participants. While some participants emphasized a desire to listen, they simultaneously articulated a need for their suffering to be acknowledged. In contexts of acute violence, dialogue spaces can therefore become arenas where competing needs for recognition emerge rather than spaces defined only by listening.

One female Jewish Israeli participant described joining the dialogue in search of emotional structure during a particularly difficult time:

"I was depressed (...)Maybe participating in a framework would help me a bit"

Another participant highlighted the absence of spaces in everyday life where such conversations could occur, explaining that even relationships with Arab Palestinians closed colleges in a social change organisation, remained silent and that she felt she cannot share much with them regarding the war:

"Ï could not talk with any of my Arab friends about it, at work I could not dialogue with my colleagues, we kept on working together but never talked about it. I wanted to hear

and also share how much I am in pain; I wanted to know that they are listening to me too and wanted to recreate meaningful relationships with Arabs in Israel".

These reflections illustrate how dialogue groups can become rare social spaces where individuals are able to articulate emotions and narratives that remain suppressed in everyday interactions. Palestinian participants also described entering the dialogue during a moment of acute crisis with an urgent need to voice their own experiences:

"The times were desperate and I needed to be heard to take part in something good". Palestinian participant

4.1 The Question of Hope

An important theme that emerged in the research concerned the question of hope. At the beginning of the program, when facilitators were asked to complete a welcome questionnaire, many expressed resistances to engaging with the concept of hope. Organisers and facilitators explicitly refused to address questions related to hope. This response reflected the difficulty of articulating hope during a period of ongoing violence and destruction. Similarly, Palestinian partners from Citizens for the environment expressed reservations about including questions about hope in the initial questionnaire. Within the context of war and mass suffering, the idea of hope was perceived by some participants and facilitators as inappropriate or disconnected from lived reality.

In contrast, Jewish Israeli participants repeatedly identified hope and the search for hope as a central motivation for joining the dialogue process. Both in the initial questionnaire and in subsequent interviews, Jewish participants described their participation as an attempt to maintain or recover a sense of possibility for shared life despite the surrounding violence.

At the same time, Palestinian participants who initially resisted framing the process in terms of hope often reported feeling more hopeful during the dialogue itself. Over the course of the meetings, several participants emphasized that the environmental cooperation projects associated with the program became a concrete source of hope. These shared initiatives involved collaboration around environmental issues and appeared to provide a practical and future oriented dimension to the dialogue that extended beyond verbal exchange.

One Palestinian participant described how her everyday professional experience of shared work with Jewish colleagues and students shaped her perspective:

"My school is Arab but part of the Menashe Regional Council, so shared life is something I live daily. I run joint programs with Jewish schools, environmental projects, marine research, and shared learning. I always tell my students it is possible. Not everyone wants war. There are people who care about and want a shared life. I live this in my daily life, and I share these examples."

Another participant expressed a broader aspiration for empathy within society:

“I really pray that the state becomes such a course. Really, that everyone would go through it. I would be very, very happy if we lived in a society where you have empathy toward the other or toward the second side that lives inside the same state, we would have had much better lives.” Palestinian male participant

Because of the profound gap between the violent political reality and participants’ expressions of hope, we refer to these moments analytically as “counter fantasies.” Participants themselves repeatedly used language suggesting that maintaining hope under such conditions felt almost unrealistic or dreamlike. The possibility of imagining shared futures during a period of intense violence appeared, in their words, almost like a fantasy. Yet these counter fantasies functioned as an important psychological and relational resource within the dialogue process. They allowed participants to temporarily suspend the determinism of the conflict and to imagine alternative relational possibilities and perhaps even shared societies.

This dynamic resonates with broader theories in peacebuilding and conflict transformation suggesting that envisioning alternative futures, even when they appear unrealistic, can play a critical role in sustaining engagement across entrenched conflicts. Scholars such as Herbert C. Kelman and Daniel Bar-Tal have argued that dialogue processes may create spaces in which participants can momentarily step outside dominant conflict narratives and explore different ways of understanding themselves, the other, and the conflict.

4.2 Commitment Despite Difficulty

Throughout the course of the program, participants were repeatedly asked why they continued attending meetings even when encounters became emotionally difficult or confrontational. Some described moments of intense tension. For example, one Jewish Israeli male participant repeatedly stated that he felt like “a punching bag” for the Palestinian group. Another Jewish Israeli participant described encounters in which she felt blamed and confronted with anger directed toward her for actions she had not taken and did not support. A Palestinian female participant said it is painful to hear and painful to speak and she is not sure what is the purpose of an open dialogue.

Despite these difficult experiences, participants consistently emphasized their commitment to the group as the primary reason for continuing their participation. This commitment appeared to sustain engagement even during moments of frustration and emotional strain.

When two participants, one Jewish Israeli and one Palestinian, left the group, remaining members described feeling abandoned. Participants spoke about feeling deserted not only by the broader political reality but also by the loss of these group members. At the same time, many emphasized that the dialogue process allowed them to gain deeper insight into themselves and a more complex understanding of the social and political reality in which they live.

For some participants, the dialogue space itself was experienced as emotionally unsettling. One Jewish Israeli female participant described the difficulty of engaging in dialogue during wartime:

“The dialogue really scared me. (...)felt very, very forced and artificial to bring people into a room during a period of extermination.”

Yet when asked why she continued to attend, she explained that her participation reflected an ongoing search for hope and hope was developed from the difficult and sometimes harsh dialogue process. “The Jewish participants suffered and were hurt but came back and listened, it encouraged me and I also felt bad for them” says a Palestinian female participant. When asked about hope she refers to a visit to her town that made her feel that shared society is possible.

When juxtaposing the interview data with the end-of-course questionnaires participants were asked: What did you expect to gain from the course, and were those expectations fulfilled? generated strikingly diverse responses. Several participants articulated substantive professional hopes. One Palestinian participant wrote: “When I joined the course, I expected to gain in-depth and reliable knowledge that I could apply in the environmental field… I also expected to hear diverse perspectives from participants with different backgrounds, in a way that would broaden both my professional and personal outlook.” Another noted: “Greater knowledge about environmental issues.” Yet another acknowledged: “No, in the end there was no real environmental program, but I gained other things, such as a deeper understanding and a network of people.”

Jewish participants wrote “a corrective experience after the another not good dialogue experience” Yet another Jewish participant who reframed disappointment and hope together: “My expectations were not fully met, but I do not regret it, because in this state of deep crisis, hatred, denial, and disconnection within Jewish society, the very act of meeting and listening is immeasurably important.”

Research on hope in the Israeli Palestinian context has found that participants often report high levels of wishing for peace and social change while simultaneously holding very low expectations that it will materialize a tension visible throughout these responses. The course, with all its fractures, may represent something modest but irreplaceable: not the fantasy of resolution, but the reality of encounter.

Taken together, these reflections illustrate how participants’ motivations evolved throughout the dialogue process. While many initially entered the space seeking recognition for their own experiences and suffering, sustained engagement often led participants to reflect on broader questions of empathy, shared responsibility, and the possibility, however fragile, of imagining alternative futures within a deeply entrenched conflict. The environmental tours and lectures were the main expectation and hope for the Palastinan participants and the practical environmental projects were named the main source of hope for many of the overall participants.

5 Perseverance, Resilience, and "Get Through": The Dynamic Dialogue Process in Active War

5.1 Dialogue as a Microcosm of Macro-Conflict

In the crucible of active conflict, the dialogue method functions as a dynamic microcosm of the larger war. Drawing on the Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam approach and Abu-Nimer's framework for conflict transformation, dialogue is conceived not as a static exchange but as a living, adaptive process that mirrors social asymmetries, emotional ruptures, and the structural violence participants carry into the room (Abu-Nimer, 2003; Kelman, 2008). In this sense, the method itself becomes a reflection of the macrocosm. Tensions in society are reproduced, contested, and potentially transformed within the dialogue space.

5.2 The Burden of War and the Weight of Encounter

From the outset, participants entered each session weighted by the realities of everyday life in conflict. A Palestinian participant described:

"Listen, I'll tell you something. We start, like, every morning, with tension. We bring with us stories from our everyday life as Palestinians inside the state. And sometimes it sounds to the other side very, very exaggerated. And they don't expect that we live in this reality, but little by little, they started to get used to these stories that we live, and they started to internalize that there is another reality that they don't know."

Another participant:

"We are exposed to Israeli society much more than Israeli society is exposed to us. We go out, we work in places that are shared, and we experience the experience from both sides, so that is the everyday life we live. In contrast, the Jewish side really doesn't really know the reality of Arabs inside the state. And there are those who don't meet Arabs at all. They come out of a reality that is very similar to their own, and they haven't entered the Arab villages or the Arab cities. And they don't know what challenges they live."

These testimonies illustrate how war realities intensify the difficulty of dialogue. The room is simultaneously a site of learning, emotional exposure, and confrontation with structural inequities.

5.3 Critiques of Method: Structure, Content, and Power

The open-ended and dynamic conflict dialogue method produced unease for some participants, particularly Jewish-Israeli ones. One said:

"They put you in a group without really having a topic, waiting for something to come up, and then someone responds, and I really struggled with that."

Moreover, power dynamics surfaced:

“I felt there were more Jewish than Arab participants. Numbers matter. Power dynamics matter. Even if dialogue is good, imbalance is felt.”

These critiques highlight the tension inherent in a method designed to reflect macro-level conflict. Openness and reflection of power relations are valued theoretically, but the structure can feel unmoored when embedded power reflection experienced firsthand in a dialogue session room.

5.4 Emotional Weight and Participant Departures

The intensity of war and daily structural injustice sometimes overwhelmed participants, causing ruptures in the dialogue:

“There are those who came with a lot of heaviness in their heart, threw everything onto the Israeli group, and then there are those who didn’t, didn’t succeed in digesting what was. And they simply left. They said we came to extend a hand; you accuse us of things we didn’t do, and we don’t want to be here anymore. We leave with a very unpleasant feeling, and we don’t want to continue.”

These moments reveal the importance of the group and the community that was built and developed.

5.5 The Team as Microcosm

A parallel process unfolded within the coordination and facilitation team alongside the participants’ dialogue process. The internal dynamics of the team reflected many of the tensions present in the broader conflict context. Political sensitivities, interpersonal frictions, and ambiguities around roles and responsibilities occasionally generate strain within the team. At times, facilitators and organizers described moments of frustration, feelings of insufficient recognition or support, and disagreements regarding leadership and decision-making. These tensions were further intensified by the pressures of the war context and by underlying Jewish-Palestinian dynamics that sometimes surfaced within the team itself.

Within this context, the overall process was carefully managed through a network of facilitation and organizational coordination. Coordination between the different organizational actors, mediation of emerging tensions, and maintenance of working relationships within the facilitation structure were ongoing features of the process. It was within this distributed system that Roi took on a key role as an intermediary, ensuring communication and alignment between Citizens for the Environment and the facilitators of School for Peace.

The facilitation process therefore extended beyond the participant space and also required ongoing negotiation within the team regarding authority, partnership, and responsibility. In this sense, the facilitation structure became another arena in which broader societal tensions and emotional pressures were reflected and worked through.

At the same time, differing perspectives among organizers regarding the role and value of dialogue also emerged. Some expressed skepticism toward dialogue as a primary strategy for change, emphasizing instead the importance of political activism. These perspectives highlight an underlying tension between dialogue-based approaches and more action-oriented forms of engagement within the broader field of peacebuilding.

5.6 "Get Through": Perseverance as Methodological Anchor

A recurring theme across both interviews and questionnaire responses points to perseverance not merely as a personal quality, but as a methodological principle embedded in the course's structure. The act of continuing, completing a session, a day, a full weekend, despite conflict, discomfort, and the weight of the political moment, functioned as a mechanism of method.

Participants kept coming. In a year of profound rupture between Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel, this was not self-evident. The continuity of presence, even when dialogue was painful or incomplete, created something that neither curriculum nor facilitation alone could manufacture: a space where speaking and listening remained possible. As one participant observed: "We got though, to a certain degree, the dialogue brings the sides together, but more the Israeli side empathizes with the Palestinian side. And it raises empathy with the other side. It brings us closer."

Another captured the stakes of that continuity with precision: "I don't think that through a course we will solve the occupation, but yes, especially in a time like this, to allow a space where it's possible to talk about these things. For me, that is already action." This framing, presence as action, captures the logic of perseverance as methodology. The course did not promise resolution; it promised return.

Most interviewees and Roi kept on talking about getting though the difficult dialogue process, what perseverance produced was not necessarily peace or change or hope, but something arguably more foundational: a conditionally safe space for dialogue. A Palestinian participant, responding to the question of how participation affected their perspective on intergroup relations, reflected at length:

"My participation in the course had a profound impact on my perspective on intergroup relations in society. I realized that many of the tensions do not stem only from historical or political disagreements, but from a lack of genuine listening and attempts at mutual understanding. When we were given a safe space for dialogue, I discovered that behind every opinion there is a personal story, and behind every stance there is a human being seeking recognition and respect. I developed a stronger sense that building healthy relationships between groups requires the courage to acknowledge pain and injustice, and at the same time a willingness to search for shared points of connection."

A Jewish participant, answering the same question, wrote that participation "sharpened my understanding of power relations in light of the ongoing genocide" a response that reveals how safety, even when achieved, does not neutralize

asymmetry, but may allow it to be named. That the two responses sit side by side, one oriented toward shared humanity, one toward structural injustice, is itself a testament to what perseverance made possible: not consensus, but honest dialogue within the same space.

Perseverance, in this reading, is not incidental to that infrastructure, it is its primary material.

5.7 Roi's Role in Holding the Process and Connection with the RBF

As director, Roi described his role as sustaining continuity across sessions, meetings, and days. His approach illustrates a key dimension of dialogue under conflict: the act of persistence itself constitutes methodological success. The ongoing commitment to get through each encounter ensures the space remains open, allowing learning, empathy, and collaboration to unfold (Abu-Nimer, 2003; Kelman, 2008). In contexts of active war, this commitment to process durability stabilizes the method and allows the encounter to continue even when immediate resolution is impossible. From a theoretical perspective, Roi's role highlights the importance of emergent leadership within fragile group dynamics. In societies where formal leadership may be absent, contested, or distrusted, the deliberate assumption of responsibility "taking" a role becomes a critical act of social and methodological structuring (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984). By actively situating himself as a persistent anchor within the dialogue, Roi not only facilitates continuity but models the relational and procedural responsibilities that participants may internalize. In this sense, leadership is less about authority or positional power and more about the performative commitment to maintain the collective process, demonstrating how individual agency can mitigate structural or societal deficits in leadership. Over the course of this research, two interviews were conducted with Irene and Sarah from the Robert Bosch Foundation, one in the presence of Roi and one without, offering a layered perspective on the relational dynamics between funders and grassroots organisations. Central to the Foundation's philosophy is a deliberate non-prescriptive stance toward the organisations it supports, resisting the impulse to define or direct their work in favour of creating conditions for autonomous growth. What emerged from these conversations was a striking illustration of how this ethos manifests in practice: the director of the course received not only financial sustenance but also a form of institutional holding a space in which to conceptualise, to articulate the inherent difficulties of the process, and to feel genuinely seen in that struggle. Of particular note was the relational generosity Roi extended to the facilitation team and to the partners at Friends of the Environment, and the palpable sense that this investment of care was recognised and valued by the funders themselves. This mutuality of appreciation, the way in which acknowledgement appeared to move bidirectionally between donor and recipient, speaks to a model of leadership and of philanthropic engagement that is rare, and

arguably transformative in its capacity to fortify not only individual leaders but the collective structures they sustain that allow perseverance.

5.8 From Dialogue to Doing: Environmental Action

A turning point occurred when participants transitioned from narrative dialogue to joint environmental projects:

“There are successes, out of all the pain and frustration the projects are underway, and there are more initiatives and more people joining the community, social, and environmental circle.”

The method here became tangible. Activism grounded the dialogue, eased relational tension, and reinforced the get through principle by linking persistence with visible collaborative action.

6 The Connection Between Environmental Activism and Dialogue

Many participants in this study articulated a deep attachment to the environmental projects within the course, describing them as a source of joy, hope, and meaningful connection across groups. One participant stated unequivocally that the environmental theme was central to their engagement: “Look, first of all, the topic itself. I’m a science teacher…dealing with climate change and environmental issues, and that really interests me…” The participant explains that the environmental framing, combined with the course’s setting “a place I had never been to before” initiated both curiosity and connection: “That’s what brought me here.” This suggests that the environmental component functioned as an initial attractor for engagement and many of the Palastinan participants expectations were around gaining more environmental knowledge.

However, an important question that emerges is whether the environmental content itself fosters dialogue and connection, or is it the activist practice, the act of working together across identities that generate hope and relational breakthroughs, independent of topic. This chapter argues that the process of doing, the workshops and tours, joint creation, and collaborating is at the heart of intergroup connection, drawing on scholarship on intergroup contact, peacebuilding through cooperative action, and alternative forms of activism beyond environmental content.

6.1 Activism, Cooperative Action, and Intergroup Contact

Contemporary conflict and peace research highlights the significance of cooperative engagement between individuals from historically divided groups as a mechanism that reduces prejudice and builds trust. Allport's classic contact hypothesis posits that intergroup cooperation under conditions of equal status and shared goals can reduce intergroup bias and foster more positive relationships (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Recent peacebuilding frameworks extend this insight, showing that cooperative projects particularly those involving shared problem-solving can facilitate meaningful exposure, empathy, and mutual recognition (Stewart & Brown, 2011; Pettigrew et al., 2011).

In peace and conflict studies, this mechanism is not limited to environmental issues. The literature on grassroots activism in divided cities suggests that cross-group collaborative work, whether in peace advocacy, cultural events, or development projects sets an example of cooperation and shared purpose for broader communities (Barbour, 2024). Collaborative work can progress from cooperation to deeper collaboration when trust and shared understandings grow over time, particularly in contexts where activists begin with parallel agendas and gradually align them through practice.

This supports the idea that environments in which individuals do something together whether planting a garden, codesigning a community space, or engaging in technical training foster contact outcomes similar to those identified by contact theorists and critical conflict theories, where reduced prejudice and improved intergroup attitudes occur through extended, collaborative engagement.

6.2 Activism and Dialogue in Practice: Participant Reflections

Participants reinforced the notion that shared action transformed the nature of dialogue. As one participant reflected: "As time went on and it was already around projects actually doing something together… then it was already a different kind of dialogue. With a lot of humor and a lot of love as well." This aligns with research showing that project-based interactions often lead to more natural, emotionally supportive exchanges than structured dialogue alone.

Another participant contrasted early stages of the course with later, project-focused engagement: "…only now this mode of joint work was created, which is so fruitful…" This observation resonates with the idea that structured dialogue may be necessary but insufficient without a parallel emphasis on cooperative action. In peace education research, participants frequently report that active engagement and community-oriented tasks deepen personal transformation and motivate peacebuilding beyond room discussion.

Participants also articulated how doing work together inspires visions of broader impact: "I imagine us working together, creating change, being a model for others…" Such sentiments reflect collective efficacy the belief that cross-group action can model

shared societies and inspire change beyond the immediate context. This aligns with studies indicating that when members of divided groups collaborate on shared tasks or goals, they develop stronger commitments to collective change and broader social cohesion.

6.3 Is Environmental Content Crucial, Or Is Activist Practice the Key?

The end-of-course questionnaires show that participants are strongly focused on the future. When asked how they intended to apply what they had learned, responses pointed consistently toward practice. A Jewish participant wrote: “In every climate course that I will now teach, I will mention the connection to the occupation. I will also add its developments to a field trip day. I don’t fully know yet, but I would like to use and leverage the knowledge and connections I gained in the course to better understand my community and promote projects in the spirit of the course.” Palestinian participants expressed similar commitments: “I plan to use what I gained from the course to develop the environmental field by integrating the human and social dimension alongside the environmental one, with a focus on environmental justice and its impact on different groups.” Others wrote of using “dialogue and educational tools to facilitate sensitive environmental discussions within school and community settings,” of incorporating “personal narratives and life experiences when presenting environmental topics in order to increase impact and connection,” and of aspiring “to strengthen cooperation between different bodies and groups in environmental initiatives, based on the belief that nature can be a shared space for encounter and joint action.”

These responses are notable not only for their content but for their tone. They suggest that even among participants whose expectations were not fully met, the course generated momentum toward future action. Yet they also raise a deeper question: was it the environmental content specifically that produced this effect, or something about the structure of shared action itself?

Several participants voiced this ambivalence directly. One reflected: “I’m not saying you also don’t need the talking side, but we only know this mode of joint work was created.” Another suggested that earlier field-based engagement might have eased tensions more naturally: “I do think that if we had gone out into the field earlier, maybe that could help.” The tours and field visits were consistently described as highlights of the course, moments where connection felt most genuine and least structured. Yet this observation itself raises questions about whether environmental activism specifically the indispensable ingredient is, or whether it was the shared experience of being in the tours and projects together that carried the weight.

Research on collaborative learning in conflict settings has found that dialogue embedded in action, whether through joint planning, shared problem-mapping, or skill-based practice, generates deeper engagement than reflective dialogue alone (Abu-Nimer, 2003; Kelman, 2008). In protracted violent intergroup conflicts, hope counteracts apathy, and malleability beliefs challenge mindsets that frame conflicts as inherently unchangeable. Shared activism, regardless of its specific domain, may

serve precisely this function: producing visible outcomes that validate the process and reinforce participants' sense of agency.
In this light, environmentalism appears to have functioned in this course less as an irreplaceable content area and more as a strategic entry point. Environmental issues offered a domain of shared relevance that could, at least partially, cut across existing political and social divisions. They allowed for collective action in a space less immediately charged than direct engagement with contested historical or political narratives. And the concrete outcomes of environmental projects gave participants something tangible to point to, reinforcing both the value of the dialogue and their own role within it.
The research presented here does not suggest that environmental content is dispensable. Participants clearly valued and were genuinely moved by it. Rather, it suggests that the mechanism driving connection and hope-building was the practice of working together toward a shared goal. Any form of meaningful joint activism might serve this purpose. The environment provided the door; it was the act of creating, walking through it together, and continuing to do so, that mattered.

6.4 Challenges, Limitations, and Proposals for Improvement

Despite the potential of collaborative activism to strengthen connections, participants identified challenges in sustaining engagement and translating project work into long-term relationships. One noted that not many people… really take an active part in the project, they were here but not here … which was one of the goals of the course… and I think that's a miss." Another highlighted the difference between talking and doing: "…what opens and what comes up when you sit and what opens and what comes up when you do something together those are two different qualities…"

These reflections echo findings in the literature that intergroup contact and action must be voluntary, sustained, and grounded in mutual respect to reduce prejudice effectively. Contact under threat or without equal status may fail to produce positive outcomes or could even reinforce biases.

Participants' improvement proposals for more practical tools, field tours earlier, and periodic informal gatherings align with peacebuilding research advocating for multi-modal interventions in dialogue and activism. Ensuring structures that facilitate both dialogic reflection and project-based collaboration can create synergistic effects, allowing participants to integrate personal narratives and shared action.

7 Conclusions

Participants entered this course carrying different, and sometimes contradictory, hopes and expectations. They came from communities in active conflict, living under conditions of war and ongoing violence. And yet, dialogue happened. Environmental

justice projects were planned and carried out. People showed up, week after week, and kept the process alive.

What made this possible was not the absence of tension or disagreement. Power relations were unequal, motivations differed, and the emotional weight of the political moment was present in every session. What made it possible was persistence. The commitment to return, to sit together again, to continue working on a shared task even when it was uncomfortable, proved to be the course's most significant methodological resource.

Environmentalism served as an effective entry point for this process. It offered a domain of shared relevance that both groups could engage with, one that carried political potential without requiring direct confrontation with the most contested dimensions of the conflict from the outset. The field visits and joint projects gave participants something concrete to do together, and in doing so, created conditions for recognition and empathy that more abstract dialogue alone might not have reached.

The interviews make clear that the course functioned as a kind of microcosm of the broader conflict, with all its asymmetries, ruptures, and emotional complexity playing out in real time. Facilitators worked under considerable strain. Participants carried the weight of everyday violence into the room. That the process held together under these conditions, and that it left lasting positive impressions on those who took part, is itself a finding worth taking seriously.

The broader research literature on peace education, dialogue, and peacebuilding supports what these interviews suggest: that cooperative engagement across group lines, whether in environmental action, healthcare, or community work, can reduce prejudice and build the kind of trust that sustains dialogue over time (Abu-Nimer, 2003; Kelman, 2008). In contexts of protracted conflict, hope counteracts apathy, and the belief that things can change challenges the mindset that conflict is fixed and permanent. What appears to matter most is not the specific content around which people gather, but the quality of the cooperative experience itself, whether participants come to see each other as capable, committed, and worth engaging with.

This study was conducted under exceptional circumstances, and that context cannot be separated from its findings. Further research in less extreme conditions would help clarify how these dynamics unfold outside of wartime, and what elements of this model might be transferable to other settings. What this course demonstrates, even in its most difficult moments, is that shared action can open a space for dialogue where little else can. That space may be modest, incomplete, and at times uncomfortable. But it is real, and in the conditions described here, it is already making a difference.

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