The ‘Promoting Inclusive Governance for Youth and Women in Iraq’ project, funded by the United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, aimed to strengthen youth’s skills to forge connections with their communities, local authorities, and decision makers. The project targeted young women and men in rural communities across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) with limited opportunities to engage in local governance, and few platforms to make their voices heard. Throughout the Inclusive Governance project, Search for Common Ground established Youth Leadership Councils (YLCs) in six locations in the KRI: Soran, Sumel, Shekhan, Ranya, Chamchamal, and Halabja. YLCs provide youth with skills and non-violent channels through which they can collaboratively address their grievances.

In Ranya, a mid-size town in the North of Sulaymaniyah governorate, Baxan and Muhammad have been key members of the YLC, investing their time in the Council’s success and sustainability. For them, joining the Ranya YLC was an opportunity to create connections with youth from different backgrounds, and with different ideas.

Baxan saw the Ranya YLC as an opportunity for her to be a female leader in her community. “There is a lack of female leadership in Ranya”, she says, “so I wanted to develop my skills and become a female role model in my community.” She is passionate about encouraging young women to participate in civil society, within her community.

The YLC in Ranya has enabled youth to gain skills, and a platform, to effectively engage with local authorities. For their small grant initiative, the YLC focused on raising awareness of drug use and drug abuse in the region. Ranya YLC members organized awareness-raising sessions for local security forces, seminars led by local school teachers, and discussion sessions with religious leaders and healthcare workers. Muhammad particularly enjoyed working on the small grant initiative, noting that it also an opportunity for the YLC “to work together on a daily basis, determining needs, managing a budget, and handling logistics.”

Now that the project has ended, the Ranya YLC has secured an office in the town’s community center. “Thanks to the relationships we built with the Ranya local authorities”, says Muhammad, “we faced no challenges in securing an office space.” Baxan’s goal for the future of the YLC is for young women in Ranya to more actively participate and lead YLC activities. The Ranya YLC aims to host more activities in informal spaces, at the heart of the community and the city. Baxan and Muhammad also plan on further developing the skills of their members, and to continue building bridges between Ranya’s youth and authorities. “I want youth to be decision makers: not just to be able to express criticism, but also to make decisions”, concludes Baxan.

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