

The Takatuf Campaign: Caring for the Environment is our Responsibility



The 'Promoting Inclusive Governance for Youth and Women in Iraq' project oversaw the implementation of the 'Takatuf' initiative, Arabic for 'shoulder to shoulder'. Launched in January 2021, Takatuf was an online social media campaign which showcased innovative advocacy ideas generated by youth across Iraq. The campaign aimed to encourage civic participation on contemporary issues of public concern and imbue youth leaders with the agency to undertake public advocacy initiatives.

Candidates from across Iraq were invited to present their advocacy ideas through a video application. From over 500 applications submitted, Search selected twenty applicants, nine women and eleven men, one from each of Iraq's governorates, and two from the Baghdad governorate. The candidates were selected to design an advocacy campaign aimed at raising awareness for local issues and encouraging civic engagement to transcend existing divisions along ethnic, social and cultural lines.

The campaign included four competition rounds through which a process of elimination was undertaken via a judge's panel. All twenty selected candidates initially participated in a six day workshop held in Erbil on campaign strategy, after which the candidates launched their campaign. A three-judge panel selected 10 candidates to proceed to the next round. The ten candidates received a \$500 grant and mentorship from an advocacy coach to produce follow up videos of their campaign. Community engagement through interactive audience voting complemented the judges panel in selecting five candidates to receive a \$1000 grant to scale up their campaign. After a further round of videos and voting the judges panel selected three finalists who received \$1500 and continued coaching. Each finalist produced a campaign highlights video, to showcase the accomplishments of their campaign in the final ceremony. The three judges, in agreement with online public voting selection, announced the Takatuf 2021 winner, Paiwand Subhi!

Paiwand's advocacy campaign entitled, 'The Environment is our Responsibility' focused on addressing climate change and environmental issues in Kirkuk. Paiwand set out to underscore the dangers of environmental pollution and promote awareness raising for environmental health in Kirkuk. Paiwand used social media as a means of educating and mobilizing the community to protect the environment through the responsible disposal of waste and planting trees to increase green spaces. Throughout his campaign, he engaged several volunteers to plant hundreds of trees in Kirkuk city as well as build the 'Environment Statue', constructed completely from waste collected in Kirkuk City, and situated on the main road entering Kirkuk from Erbil. The mayor of Kirkuk led the statue inauguration ceremony and several local and regional media channels covered the event including Rudaw, K24, NRT, Kirkuk TV.

Since becoming Takatuf's 2021 winner, Paiwand's public advocacy initiative has taken off. He utilized the awarded grant to mobilize 120 volunteers to plant 3,000 trees around Kirkuk city. He has also ramped up his public awareness initiative through the creation of educational street art depicting steps that can be taken to protect the environment. Additionally, he has funded the dispersion of hundreds of waste bins across the city, to facilitate responsible waste disposal.

Paiwand has also earned popularity in Kirkuk following his campaign; as Paiwand states: "my nickname is Environment! When people see me in Kiruk they tell me that we need to protect our environment." Paiwand also underscored the importance of the 'Environment Statue' as a hallmark of his initiative; "the statue that we built in Kirkuk has become famous. It is an attraction to the people of Kirkuk, they now come to it to take a photo." Moving forward, Paiwand set strong goals: "the rate of green zones in Kirkuk is growing by 1% and we are trying to raise this to 30%." He plans to engage and mobilize the community further to advance environmental protection through the enlargement of green spaces and awareness raising.

The Takatuf campaign also facilitated an expansion of Paiwand's network within Kirkuk. He has garnered funding interest from the private and public sectors, and has already secured further funding from Saker Productions, a private sector company to continue his initiative. Additionally, the local government of Kirkuk city has committed to watering trees which are planted under Paiwand's initiative. Paiwand also continues to maintain contact with his fellow Takatuf peers, and has plans to collaborate by holding seminars on environmental protection in governorates across Iraq. When asked about his plans for the future Paiwand says, "I have many plans now; we want to hit a target of 200,000 trees planted. I also want to hold seminars for more than one person to conduct so that it is not just me spreading the environment-awareness but the greater community." Paiwand aims to continue to unite Kirkuk around this central issue. As he concludes: "We are focused here on Iraq but this is a global problem for all humans. I want to plant more trees and show people that I am continuing to help the environment in Kirkuk. Takatuf has helped to raise awareness for my campaign... so many people now recognize me and the objective of our campaign."