UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Asfour Initiative: Reclaiming Ocean Literacy through Islamic Ethics and Community-Led Storytelling and Wellbeing in South Sinai

The Asfour Initiative – Summer 2026 Report

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Summary

The Asfour Initiative's Summer 2026 report covers a children-led storytelling program using puppetry to connect children in Sinai, Gaza, and Songea (Tanzania) with ocean literacy through Islamic and Bedouin ethical frameworks. The core curriculum comprises six thematic prompts: Amanah (Trust), Mizan (Balance), Rifq (Gentleness), Intimaa (Belonging), Sabr (Patience), and Khalifa (Guardianship), each pairing a Quranic/prophetic teaching with a corresponding marine-ecology concept (coral bleaching, food webs, coral restoration, parrotfish bioerosion, ecosystem recovery, and rights-of-nature case law), delivered through weekly dual-lesson modules with hands-on games, drawing, and puppet-show creation. The pilot ran 30 July–21 August at the Habiba Community Learning Centre in Nuweiba'a, Sinai, facilitated by two local Bedouin teachers, with younger children (3–6) contributing visual/character ideas and older children (7–12) developing these into scripts and performances. Three of the six prompts (Amanah, Rifq, Khalifa) were completed there, culminating in three puppet shows and community celebrations. The fourth prompt, Intimaa, was then adapted and delivered at the Olive You Hub in Cairo for displaced Gazan children, reframing "belonging" around displacement and loss of home and closing with a children's song performance and a Dabkah dance. Two findings stand out: participation grew from roughly 8 to 45 Bedouin children over the program, driven largely by the pull of the puppet-show performances; and children from two distinct clans of the Al-Muzeinah tribe (Ghawanmah and Sakhan) began participating together by the final show, showcasing a shared creative space bridging. On materials, the team deliberately avoided identifiable photography of children, given community sensitivities around consent, relying instead on artwork, scripts, and puppet performances (illustrated throughout by Sarah Mohamed/Swaidraws) as the record of participation.

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Picture of children awards in last puppet show, Khalifa (guardianship) prompt, Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. *Photo credit: Farah Sweis.*

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Background

The Asfour Initiative is a community-led ocean literacy project that turns the Nile and Red Sea into a single co-creative thread connecting women, children, and communities through storytelling and ocean literacy. It begins with waste: local fishermen pull plastic out of the water they depend on. That plastic passes into the hands of local women in across Egypt who crochet it into marine puppets and dolls. These crocheted ocean dolls then become the initiative's educational tools (Asfour dolls), used to introduce children to ocean literacy and their own relationships with the marine environment.

At its heart, the initiative is a decolonial project. It does not import environmentalism as an external framework to be taught, but works to restore something that was never absent: the ecological knowledge, rights, and relationships to land and sea that already live within Islamic ethics and Indigenous Bedouin identity. Islam is not brought in to lead this narrative but rather is invited back into conversation with the ocean as a co-creative partner, reconnecting children to a way of understanding their environment that colonial and Western-centric education has displaced.

During the summer of 2026, the Asfour Initiative piloted this approach through a new children-led curriculum in Nuweiba, Sinai, delivered at the Habiba Community Learning Centre. The curriculum brought ocean literacy into conversation with six Islamic ethical principles, offering Bedouin children a foundation through which to explore their relationship with the sea and the living world around them. Each principle was drawn from concepts already present in the children's religious and cultural lives, then extended into questions of coral reef protection, marine life, fishing, and the broader environmental responsibility bound up with protecting their rights to land and ocean. This same spirit anchors a cross-community silent book, which weaves together three communities whose relationships to water carry different, and differently urgent, meaning. In Gaza, the "Dream Fishers" create dreamcatchers in the hope of carrying their stories beyond occupation as their sea and imagination became a form of reach when physical freedom is denied. In Sinai, Asfour, a shape-shifting peacemaker from the Nuweiba community, collects the dreams of Gazan children and works alongside Bedouin women to crochet dolls that carry the stories of the land and ocean's Indigenous stewards. And in Songea, Tanzania, children and young girls at the NEMCA kindergarten community write songs and music for an ocean they have never lived beside as a landlocked community, thus they reach for the sea through imagination alone. Together, these communities are united by a shared act of reclaiming ocean literacy on their own terms, outside colonial frameworks. The curriculum was piloted through hands-on workshops with Bedouin

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children at the Habiba Community Learning Centre, who produced and filmed puppet-show episodes built from the curriculum's Islamic and ocean-literacy prompts, guided throughout by Bedouin teachers. Illustrator Sarah Mohamed (Swaidraws) translated this learning into real-time illustrations, feeding both the children's silent book which merges stories across all three communities, and a wider multimedia archive. This archive supports structured feedback sessions and community screenings across Sinai, Gaza, and

Cairo, alongside systematic monitoring and evaluation led by the Bedouin community itself, which is all designed to keep children at the center as storytellers and evaluators.



Figure 1 Asfour Initiative Curriculum Cover, Dana Ahmed, June 2026.

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Creation of Curriculum

Rather than presenting environmentalism in isolation, the curriculum explicitly roots ecological stewardship in Islamic ethics, Quranic verses, Hadiths, and prophetic histories. Specifically, it draws upon the six foundational religious concepts chosen in the curriculum to teach children that caring for the sea is an expression of faith and moral duty. Through stories of Prophets Shuaib, Qarun, Yunus, and Dawood, alongside traditional Bedouin institutions like *Hima* (community-protected conservation lands), the curriculum establishes three interconnected dimensions of responsibility: what human beings owe to God, what they owe to one another, and what they owe to the natural world.

The overarching framework of the curriculum is structured around six thematic prompts, co-created by illustrators Sanpo Yokoi and Sarah Mohamed (Swaidraws). The first prompt, **Amanah (Trust)**, frames the ocean as a living garden entrusted to humanity, where children study coral polyp biology, mass spawning events, and the devastating impacts of coral bleaching, acidification, and pollution alongside Quranic verses from Surah Al-Ahzab and Surah An-Nisa. The second prompt, **Mizan (Balance)**, explores ecological harmony through marine food webs, trophic levels, and overfishing, illustrating how removing apex predators like sharks causes destructive mesopredator release, while referencing Surah Ar-Rahman and the story of Qarun's ruinous greed. The third prompt, **Rifq (Gentleness)**, contrasts aggressive, rushed interventions with patient stewardship, teaching practical Red Sea coral restoration methods, such as harvesting 'corals of opportunity' and nurturing them in underwater nurseries, while drawing from prophetic teachings on gentleness and Bedouin *Hima* practices. The fourth prompt, **Intimaa (Belonging),** demonstrates that sustained environmental care springs from a deep sense of home, focusing scientifically on parrotfish bioerosion, where individual fish grind coral rock into up to a ton of white beach sand annually, and linking it to the Islamic concept of the Ummah as one interconnected body. The fifth prompt, **Sabr (Patience)**, addresses the reality that marine ecosystem recovery requires disciplined, long-term management rather than quick fixes, mirroring the story of Prophet Yunus and the patient regeneration of damaged habitats. Finally, the sixth prompt, **Khalifa (Guardianship)**, is situated as the last prompt acting as a holistic concept that merges all past principles learnt. Khalifa elevates children and marine creatures to successive guardians (khulafa'a) responsible for handing down a healthy ocean to future generations, combining Quranic reflections on human stewardship with modern rights-of-nature case studies, such as the legal personhood granted to New Zealand's Whanganui River and Pacific indigenous whale conservation declaration.

Operationally, the curriculum is organized into weekly modules, each featuring a detailed 3-day dual-lesson architecture that runs Islamic ethics lessons in tandem with scientific ocean literacy lessons. To ensure that abstract concepts are embodied rather than merely memorized, each week incorporates hands-on, interactive activities. For example, children participate in silent card-sequencing games to experience non-verbal teamwork under Amanah, egg-and-spoon relay races to feel physical balance under Mizan, creative story-writing under Rifq, water-bucket passing relays under Intimaa, seed planting and pot decoration to practice long-term nurturing under Sabr, and the signing of personal environmental pledge banners displayed in their classrooms under Khalifa.

The core methodology centres on empowering children as primary storytellers, authors, and evaluators. Rather than reciting pre-scripted lines, Bedouin youth at the Habiba Community Learning Centre use the weekly prompts to co-create original storylines, author character dialogues, and design monologues for puppet show performances. Professional facilitators of whom were Bedouin teachers, Alaa and Zainab, played a supportive, secondary role, helping children synthesize their learning into full six-episode puppet show plays. These performances serve as a celebratory weekly culmination, allowing children to demonstrate their understanding of both marine ecology and religious ethics through drama, play, and collaborative co-creation.



Figure 3 Habiba Learning Centre, Habiba Learning Centre in Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. *Photo credit: Dana Ahmed.*

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Figure 4 Habiba Learning Centre students exploring Rifq prompt, Habiba Learning Centre in Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. *Photo credit: Farah Sweis.*



Figure 5 Habiba Learning Centre, Habiba Learning Centre in Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. *Photo credit: Dana Ahmed.*

Classes and Field Implementation

As with much community-based fieldwork, the implementation of the curriculum in Nuweiba'a required some adaptation from the original program design. The overall religious and ecological framework remained unchanged, but the duration of the field period, the pace of the children's engagement, and the practical realities of working within the community required us to modify the activities and sequencing. The program ultimately ran from 30 July to 21 August, with classes taking place six days a week at the Habiba Community Learning Centre in Nuweiba'a. The sessions were facilitated locally by Alaa and Zainab, Bedouin teachers from the Al-Muzeinah tribe, whose knowledge of the children, families, language, and community context was central to making the curriculum appropriate and accessible.

The program was structured around two groups: a younger group of children approximately 5-8 years old and an older group approximately 9-12 years old. Although both groups encountered the same Islamic and ecological concepts, the way those concepts were taught differed according to age. With the younger children, teaching relied predominantly on visual, auditory, and tactile forms of learning. They listened to the prophetic and environmental stories, colored illustrations, drew characters, chose character names, and developed personalities and narratives for the figures they wanted to see represented in the puppet shows. Their drawings and character concepts were incorporated directly into the puppet-show materials, including the fabric used as the

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performance backdrop, turning their ideas as central to the final creative work and puppet show performances.



Figure 6 Habiba Learning Centre students exploring Rifq prompt, Habiba Learning Centre in Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. *Photo credit: Farah Sweis.*

The older children were given a greater role in translating these ideas into written and performed narratives. They developed the storylines and scripts based partly on the characters and qualities selected by the younger children, wrote dialogue, experimented with English-language learning, and rehearsed the puppet performances. In this way, the two age groups worked as a connected creative process. The younger children contributed the visual language, characters, and imaginative foundations of the stories, while the older children developed these contributions into coherent narratives and scripts. Rather than imposing a pre-written environmental story on the children, the

curriculum therefore allowed the children to determine how the religious and ecological concepts would appear in their own stories.



Figure 7 Habiba Learning Centre students exploring Rifq prompt, Habiba Learning Centre in Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. *Photo credit: Farah Sweis.*

Each week followed a similar rhythm. Children were first introduced to an Islamic concept through a story, particularly stories concerning the Prophets and figures used within the curriculum to illustrate the week's theme. The religious narrative was then connected to an aspect of Red Sea ecology. This was followed by drawing, colouring, discussion, writing, language activities, collaborative games, and eventually puppet-show preparation. The children were therefore repeatedly moving between religious reflection, scientific learning, creative expression, and collective activity, rather than treating environmental knowledge as a separate academic subject. It is imperative to note that activities and even prophet stories were mainly communicated by the students rather than taught in a lecture-style manner. Since the concepts and stories are an essential and deliberate part of Bedouin identities, several students already knew the prophet stories and volunteered to tell them during classes to the rest of the classroom. Meanwhile, all students were familiar with the Red Sea ecology and taking care of the ocean, therefore the curriculum's only role was limited to connecting Islamic principles to ocean literacy and conservation.

The program also incorporated food and communal care into the daily structure. Throughout the six-day teaching weeks, breakfast was prepared for more than thirty children everyday, with meals including eggs, beans, falafel, jam, halva sandwiches, and

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date biscuits. Preparing and sharing food became part of the social environment of the program rather than simply a logistical provision given the importance of health and wellbeing in terms of connecting spiritually in Islam as well as academic learning. The classroom was consequently understood as a community space in which learning, eating, playing, practicing faith, creating, and spending time together were interconnected.



Figure 8 Dana and Farah Prepping breakfast for students, Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. Photo credit: Farah Sweis.

Methodology: Amanah, Rifq, and Khalifa - Taught Prompts in Sinai

The first thematic module introduced the children to Amanah, or trust. The concept was translated into the children's experience of having to rely on one another. One of the principal activities was a collaborative Jenga exercise, in which the children worked together to keep the tower standing. Each child had to consider how their own actions affected everyone else, while trusting the other children to act carefully and cooperatively. The activity provided a physical representation of the idea that something entrusted to a group cannot be protected by one person acting alone. This was subsequently connected to the idea of the ocean as an Amanah and to the responsibility of human beings to care for living systems that are dependent upon collective behaviour. The children then

explored the concept through drawing and storytelling before incorporating the idea of trust and collective responsibility into their puppet-show narratives.



Figure 9 Amanah Prompt Reflection illustration, Habiba Learning Centre in Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. *Illustration by:* Sarah Mohamed.

The second module taught was Rifq, or gentleness. This was particularly important because it allowed the curriculum to distinguish environmental care from intervention for intervention's sake. The children learned that caring for a damaged ecosystem does not necessarily mean acting quickly or forcefully, but rather it requires patience, restraint, and careful attention to the needs of living things. The scientific component introduced children to Red Sea coral restoration and transplanting, where concepts such as the use of naturally detached or 'corals of opportunity' and the nurturing of corals within underwater nurseries was taught. These examples were paired with prophetic teachings concerning gentleness and with the traditional Bedouin concept of Hima, through which communities have historically established areas of protection and restricted certain forms of use. The children were then asked to bring the concept of Rifq into their own lives through storytelling. Each child developed a short account of something they cared for or treated gently, including their families, farms, animals, dogs, and, for some children, corals encountered while fishing. This activity moved the concept away from an exclusively

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environmental context and allowed children to recognize that gentleness can describe relationships with people, animals, places, and the marine environment alike.



Figure 10 Rifq Prompt Reflection illustration, Habiba Learning Centre in Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. *Illustration by:* Sarah Mohamed.

The third and final module completed in Nuweiba'a introduced Khalifa, or guardianship. As the culminating concept of the Sinai component, Khalifa brought together the principles explored in the preceding modules and asked the children to consider what it means to become responsible guardians of the world around them. The concept was framed through the Quranic understanding of human stewardship while also introducing the broader idea that humans are not the only beings participating in the care and continuation of ecosystems. The children were encouraged to think about the responsibilities they held towards their families, animals, farms, coral reefs, and the wider

environment, and what would remain after the program ended and the facilitators left the community.



Figure 11 Khalifa Prompt Reflection illustration, Habiba Learning Centre in Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. *Illustration by:* Sarah Mohamed.

By the end of the Nuweiba'a field period, the children had produced three puppet shows, corresponding to the three curriculum prompts completed in Sinai: Amanah, Rifq, and Khalifa. Children performed the characters they had helped create, presented stories they wrote, and demonstrated their understanding of the religious and ecological concepts from their own stories and livelihoods through puppetry. The performance days also became community celebration days. They included the puppet show itself, shared cake and sandwiches, swimming with the children, and the distribution of certificates and small presents. Additionally, during the final day of the puppet show, Zainab Mutreb, one of the teachers at the Habiba Learning Centre, prepped students to perform an Egyptian children's folk song 'ذهب الليل/Thahaba El Leilu' (The Night Has Gone), which tells the story

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about a boy who ignores his mother's advice and gets scratched after teasing a cat, a lesson that begins just as the night fades and the little birds chirp at dawn.

ذهب الليل وطلع الفجر والعصفور صوصو
شاف القطة قالها بسبس قالت له نونو

ماما قالتله سيب القطة وخليها في حالها
ساب مدرسته ورمى كراسته وراح جر شكلها
راحت القطة مخربشة ايده لما مسك ديلها
وادى جزاة اللي مايسمعش كلمة ماما تقولها

ذهب الليل وطلع الفجر والعصفور صوصو
شاف القطة قالها بسبس قالت له نونو

ابله قالتلي فيفي الحلوة زعلت من سوسو
راح يصالحها وباسها وهي حلفت ماتبوسه

Throughout each puppet show performance, certificates were awarded to different forms of participation, including the best story or script writer, individual puppet characters and the children who performed them, and a student recognized for their overall contribution during the week. This provided children with multiple ways of being recognized rather than reducing achievement to academic performance alone. It also acted as a way of ensuring active participation throughout teaching days. Additionally, it was imperative to the curriculum to treat the puppet shows as a form of assessment through creation. Instead of asking children to reproduce definitions of Amanah, Rifq, and Khalifa, we could observe whether they were able to translate those concepts into dialogue and stories from their own experiences, or even songs as illustrated through the 'Thahab El Leil' performance. This approach also allowed children who were less comfortable with formal writing to participate through other creative means like drawing, performance, character

development, or oral storytelling. This was particularly important given the broad age range of our students.



Figure 12 Amanah Puppet Show, Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. *Photo credit: Farah Sweis.*



Figure 13 Amanah Puppet Show Awards, Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. *Photo credit: Farah Sweis.*

Teacher Observations and Reflections: Zainab Mutreb

My name is Zainab Mutreb. I am 28 years old, born on 16 January 1998. I hold a Bachelor's degree in Arabic Language and Literature. I am married and have two children, Murad

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and Muath. I work as a teacher at the Habiba Learning Centre, alongside my colleague, Ms Alaa, who is also an Arabic language teacher.

The centre is divided into two sections. The older children attend on Saturdays, Mondays, and Wednesdays, while the younger children attend on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. Within the older children's section, we divide the children into two groups. The group of 11 and 12-year-olds is under my supervision, while the group of 9 and 10-year-olds is taught by Ms Alaa. In the younger children's section, I teach the 5 and 6-year-olds, while Ms Alaa teaches the 7- and 8-year-olds.

When we learned that Dana and Farah would be coming to the Learning Centre, Ms Alaa and I were very excited to welcome them, and they certainly lived up to our expectations. The period they spent with us was one of the most wonderful and enjoyable times we have experienced at the Learning Centre. We could also feel the children's excitement and happiness. Although, it was not only the children who were happy, we also felt like children ourselves when we were with them, and thus took part in their activities and shared in their enthusiasm. We listened to the stories of the Prophets when Dana told them to the children, and I particularly listened attentively despite already knowing the stories very well, because Dana's way of telling them made the stories more exciting and engaging. The topics she presented were wonderful. However, there was one obstacle: the difference in dialect. Thankfully, we were able to overcome it. I would explain certain words to the children using the familiar dialects to Bedouins. We truly became one family, united by a single heart.

We also held puppet shows, which became the wonderful and exciting highlight at the end of each week. We had never held such performances before, so there was even greater excitement surrounding them. Most of the children took part in the shows, and a lovely aspect of the program was that the teachers, too, participated in the performances. We would go to the sea, even though it is not customary in our community for women to go to the beach without a man accompanying them. Nevertheless, Dana helped us overcome this difficulty by saying that we would go to a beach where there were no men. It was the first time I had gone out with a group of girls I had only just met, but it was an absolutely wonderful experience, with which words cannot do justice to describe. There is so much to say that even an entire book would not be enough to describe it. We felt such beautiful emotions and were genuinely happy to have had this experience. Even Ms Alaa was surprised that I had gone to the beach with the children. However, I felt that I had grown so fond of Dana and Farah that I persuaded my husband to let me go. I reassured him by showing him the location and explaining that there would be no men there. The performances were truly wonderful, each one better than the last.

There was another dimension to this experience with Dana and Farah: their presence in, and engagement with, our community. They asked Ms Alaa and me to help them get to know the community, and we welcomed the idea. I organized a gathering at my husband's family's home, where everyone introduced themselves, including Dana and Farah. It was a beautiful day, and we were all extremely happy. We then arranged a second gathering at my husband's family's home, where we held an activity with the women. Farah introduced an activity in which each woman traced her hand on a piece of paper and wrote or drew within it a wish, a drawing, a happy event, someone dear to her heart, and something that they like to do. We all took part in the activity, and it was a lovely experience. I also invited Dana and Farah to visit my mother. I introduced them to my family and relatives, and we spent a truly wonderful time together. They visited my mother twice, and my family were always welcoming whenever we arranged a gathering. They were enthusiastic about every new idea.

There was yet another, more personal dimension to this experience within the community: Dana and Farah visited my home. My house is far away, situated among the farms, with no one living nearby. Despite these obstacles, they did not hesitate or give up on the idea. Instead, they decided to come and visit me. I was overjoyed to have them in my home. I felt as though a spirit had entered the place, which had previously felt empty. Dana also taught me how to crochet in my own home, and I was extremely happy to have this experience because I was learning something new. This is why I said earlier that even a book would not be enough to express what I feel towards Dana. She changed the way I think about people and brought out a side of myself that I had never known existed. With Dana, I rediscovered myself. A part of my personality that I had neglected for years began to emerge again. No book could adequately describe my feelings towards this wonderful person, whom I hold in the highest regard and for whom I have such warm feelings. I will not forget Farah either. She was cheerful and lovely, with a wonderful personality. She understood problems quickly and tried to resolve whatever she could without complaining. I consulted her about certain matters, and she brought her own perspective to finding solutions. She also had wonderful ideas. Dana and Farah cared for the children like mothers, and they treated me like a sister. For the first time, I found someone with whom I could share my thoughts and feelings.

Finally, and as I have said previously, words are not enough to describe this experience. There are so many beautiful things I feel that cannot fit into a single article, so I have only been able to give a very brief account of what happened.

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Intimaa From Gaza to Cairo - Olive You Hub

The program did not reach all six curriculum prompts within the Nuweiba'a field period. Only Amanah, Rifq, and Khalifa were completed in Sinai, and we made the decision to end the Sinai component after the third prompt and continue the curriculum in a different community setting. Given the short window in which our wellbeing coordinator, Farah Sweis, had been sharing her expertise across the Nuweiba'a, community, we believed the Gazan refugee community in Egypt could benefit further from that same work. Therefore, the fourth concept, Intimaa, or belonging, was taken to the Olive You Hub in Nasr City, Cairo, a community space serving Gazan refugees in Egypt. While Intimaa had originally been conceived in relation to ecological belonging and the relationship between communities and their home environments, displacement gave the concept another, more urgent dimension. The Cairo sessions came to explore belonging both as a relationship to place and as the possibility of finding community and connection after displacement and the trauma of genocide, themes that could not have been more directly, or more painfully, relevant to the children in the room.



Figure 14 Olive You Hub students exploring Intimaa prompt, Olive You Hub in Cairo, August 2026. *Photo credit: Dana Ahmed.*

The Intimaa activities extended the creative and participatory methodology established in Nuweiba while adapting it to the circumstances of the Gazan children participating in Cairo. The curriculum's emphasis on belonging was tied both to the Islamic understanding of interconnected community and to the ecological image of the parrotfish, whose feeding

and bioerosion help form coral-sand beaches over time. Within this frame, the children were invited to consider what makes a place feel like home, what happens when people are separated from their homes, and how communities can build spaces of connection even when physical return is impossible or uncertain, questions that, for these children, were not abstract. The Cairo component also developed the broader program's connection between children, music, and storytelling. Puppet show performance day featured the children subsequently performing 'Teery Teery Ya Asfoura/Fly Fly Bird' (طيري

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طيري يا عصفورة), with music provided by Ahmed Muin, a Gazan musician, lyricist, and producer.

طيري طيري يا عصفورة
أنا متلك حلوة صغيورة
طيري طيري يا عصفورة
أنا متلك حلوة صغيورة
بركض فوق حفاف الزهر
بحجر ع ميات النهر
وبخبي بشعري بشورة
طيري طيري، طيري طيري
طيري طيري، طيري طيري
طيري طيري يا عصفورة
طيري طيري يا عصفورة
أنا متلك حلوة صغيورة
طيري طيري يا عصفورة
أنا متلك حلوة صغيورة
بركض فوق حفاف الزهر
بحجر ع ميات النهر
وبخبي بشعري بشورة
طيري طيري، طيري طيري
طيري طيري، طيري طيري
طيري طيري يا عصفورة

بيتك يا عصفورة وين
ما بشوفك غير بتطيري
ما عندك غير جناحين
حاكينا كلمة صغيرة
بيتك يا عصفورة وين
ما بشوفك غير بتطيري
ما عندك غير جناحين
حاكينا كلمة صغيرة
ولو سألونا منقلن
ما حاكتنا العصفورة

The children's song imagery consists of a small bird flying, asking where its home is, and carrying its own story, which provided a natural connection to the Asfour (bird) Initiative and to the themes of freedom and belonging that had become central to the Intimaa prompt. The curriculum concluded with a Dabkah performance by the children. Importantly, the children performed independently, without intervention or rehearsed choreography imposed by the Asfour teachers. The performance provided a final expression of the program's broader methodology: children were not positioned simply

as learners receiving knowledge from adults, but as participants capable of interpreting, transforming, and communicating what they had learned through their own cultural and creative forms.



Figure 15 Olive You Hub puppet show and performance, Olive You Hub in Cairo, August 2026. *Photo credit: Dana Ahmed.*



Figure 16 Teery Teery Ya Asfoura musical performance awards, Olive You Hub in Cairo, August 2026. *Photo credit: Nada Alkurd.*

Findings

The most immediate finding was the substantial growth in children's participation over the course of the program. The classes in Nuweiba'a initially began with approximately eight children, but participation increased steadily, reaching approximately 45 children by the final puppet show. This growth was particularly significant because the program was initially designed around a relatively small group and had to adapt organically as more

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children became interested in the activities. The puppet shows appeared to provide an important point of attraction, with the combination of storytelling, performance, food, swimming, certificates, and opportunities for children to see their own creative work publicly presented helping to broaden participation beyond the initial group.

A second significant observation concerned the participation of the major two clans within Al Muzeinah tribe. The community includes two clans, Ghawanmah and Sakhan, of which the Habiba Community Learning Centre was facilitated by two teachers from each respective community: Zainab of the Ghawanmah and Alaa from Sakhan. During the initial classes, the children participating in the program were from Ghawanmah. However, by the final puppet show, children from Sakhan had begun joining the performance, despite the initial composition of the group being exclusively Ghawanmah children. The change was a notable observation in the field of how a shared children's activity facilitated by teachers from both communities created a space in which children from the two clans were participating in the same activities.

Circles of Care: Women's Circles in Nuweiba'a

In parallel with the children's curriculum, the Asfour Initiative's wellbeing coordinator, Farah Sweis, facilitated Women's Circles of Care in Nuweiba'a in August 2026, drawing on a six-session Circle of Care program designed for the project. Two circles were held, one with women from each of the Al-Muzeinah clans, Sakhan and Ghawanmah. Because the two clans are distinct communities, the circles were kept separate and the two groups did not meet during the program. Access to both was made possible by Alaa and Zainab, the Bedouin teachers from the Sakhan and Ghawanmah clans respectively, who acted as mediators between the facilitator and each group of women and through whom the women of each clan could be gathered.

Three meetings were held with the Sakhan women, beginning on 13 August, and approximately three with the Ghawanmah women, which followed a less regular rhythm. A number of additional circles also took place in which the planned activities were not followed, but women nonetheless gathered in circle. The circles were held in different settings, in the homes of different women and by the sea. In each, the women sat together on carpets laid out on the ground around a shared centre, where tea, coffee, and food were set (Figures 17 and 18). Participation was entirely voluntary and spontaneous: no one was recruited or required to attend, the women present varied from one meeting to the next, and for this reason the exact number of participants was not recorded.

The main aim of the circles was to give these women a space of their own: a place where they could express themselves and feel something, as someone, and where their abilities and their capacity to be and to make things together were given room. Rather than introducing an external therapeutic framework, the circles were shaped around what the women brought to them.

The first meeting opened with tea and coffee, followed by the shared building of the circle's agreement: that the circle is ‘our moment’, that what is said in the circle stays in the circle unless a woman chooses to share it outside, that every woman is respected when she speaks, and that anything else needed to feel safe could be added by the group. The Asfour Puppet, a soft puppet passed from hand to hand, allowed each woman to describe herself without interruption, echoing the project's wider use of puppetry as a way of speaking with some distance between expression and identity. Every meeting closed with each woman offering a single word for how she felt.

Later meetings opened with a recalling of the agreement, and drew on a sequence of activities. In The Hand of Resources, each woman traced her hand and recorded on each finger a quality, an important person, something she does well, a wish, and a happy memory. In The Thread of Community, a ball of yarn was passed between the women, each naming one of her strengths while holding the thread, until a web (shabake) became visible at the centre of the circle. This activity was chosen in response to what emerged in the introductions: when invited to present themselves, several women described themselves only as mothers or said they did not know how to do anything else. In Emotions in Colour, women chose a colour to represent how they felt, using the Arabic word for each emotion, and could either complete the sentence "I feel this way because..." or hold the card without explaining; they could also write, draw, tear, or fold the coloured paper. The facilitator reminded the group that no emotion is wrong. In The Women Who Inspired Me, each woman thought of a woman who had made a difference in her life and wrote down a teaching she had received.

We offer the following observations cautiously, and not as evidence of outcomes. The difficulty some women had in naming their own strengths, and the ease with which the group could name them for one another, suggests that spaces in which women are asked who they are, rather than what they do for others, are rare. The voluntary nature of attendance also meant that the circles were shaped by the women who chose to come, rather than by a fixed group.

Consistent with the project's approach to consent, no photographs of participants were taken; the images included here show only the spaces in which the circles were held. Because the circles rest on the agreement that what is said stays in the circle, individual

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stories are deliberately not reproduced here. The circles served as the Sinai pilot for the Circles of Healing described in the final section.

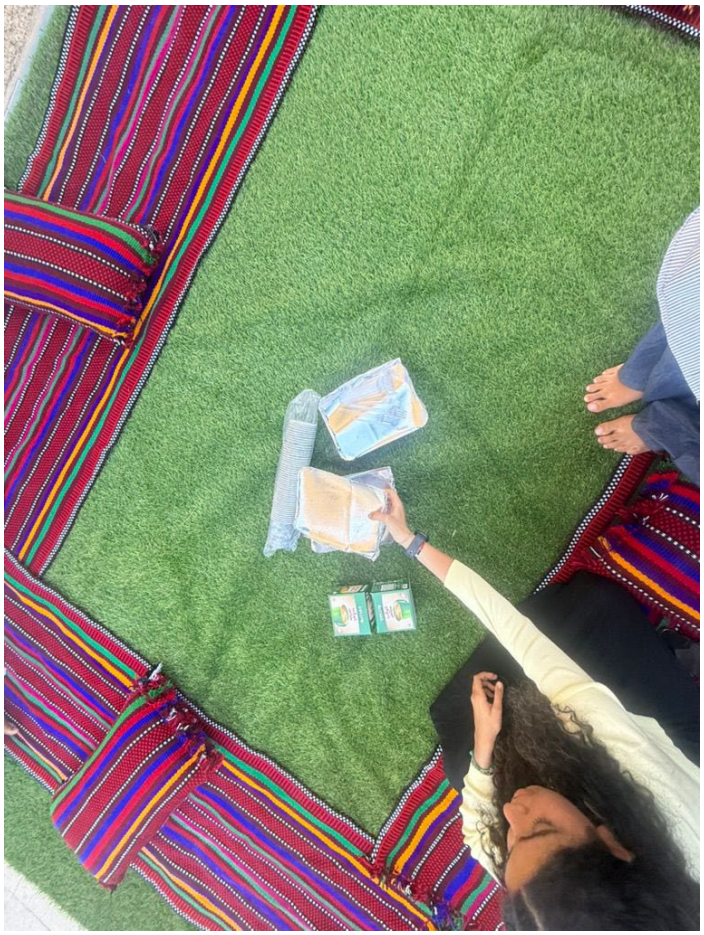


Figure 17 Setting of a Women's Circle of Care, in a participant's home, Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. Photo credit: Farah Sweis



Figure 18 Setting of a Women's Circle of Care,in a participant's home , Nuweiba'a, South Sinai, August 2026. Photo credit: Farah Sweis

Materials

The visual documentation of the program was intentionally limited. The community is conservative, and its members have experienced photographs taken by outsiders as extractive and without meaningful consent. For that reason, we did not treat photography as an automatic part of the fieldwork. We prioritized the community's wishes and cultural boundaries over a conventional visual record. The photographs that exist therefore only show the learning materials, children's artwork, classroom activities, and children performing behind the puppets, rather than identifiable images of the children themselves. The original rationale for using puppetry in the Asfour Initiative and throughout this project was so that children could share their stories without making their faces or personal circumstances made publicly visible. Children could speak, perform, and create characters while keeping some separation between their expression and their individual identities. The absence of portrait photography is not an absence of participation. The children's drawings, characters, scripts, puppet performances, pledges, and collaborative artwork are the primary record of their engagement, thus what is documented is less how the children looked than what they created and chose to contribute.

Within these constraints, visual materials were artistically illustrated alongside the educational content. Digital illustrator Sarah Mohamed (Swaidraws) developed drawings that translated each week's learning into artwork reflecting the religious and ecological concepts explored with the children, which became part of the children's learning environment and visually linked the stages of the curriculum. Sarah's artwork also appeared on the certificates presented to the children at the puppet shows, connecting their classroom experience to the recognition they received at the end of each module. Since the certificates drew on visual elements created specifically during the classes within the curriculum by the children, they were more than a generic reward, and attempted to give each child a tangible record of their participation and the creative work they had produced throughout their learning.

The materials produced through the project also extended beyond the classroom and connected communities along the Nile and the Red Sea. In Cairo, Om Kamal led a group

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of five women from Qursaya Island, working through the organization VeryNile, to crochet 100 sea-turtle dolls. Dana Ahmed first taught Om Kamal how to make the turtles, after which she passed the skill on to the other five women, creating a small chain of peer-to-peer knowledge transfer rather than relying on external instruction throughout the group. The women stuffed the dolls using plastic waste collected from the Nile by local fishermen, transforming material removed from the river into educational and artistic objects. The same craft was subsequently introduced to Bedouin women in Nuweiba'a. The dolls therefore connected women working in different communities and ecosystems through a shared creative and local practice, while also turning plastic waste into educational ocean literacy materials given that the dolls were later distributed to children in Nuweiba'a, Cairo, and Songea, with the hope (and plan) of extending distributions to Gaza too. This process reflected the wider methodology of the Asfour Initiative, in which communities are knowledge-holders, makers, teachers, and active contributors to the creation and circulation of the project's materials and stories. Rather than extracting knowledge or cultural practices from communities and reproducing them elsewhere, the process sought to allow skills to move between communities through relationships of teaching, adaptation, and shared authorship, while keeping the communities themselves at the center of how their knowledge and creative work were produced and used.

Looking Ahead

Building directly on the feedback of the women and children involved in these activities, the Asfour Initiative and bLYSs teams have since developed this work into a wider constellation of projects framed as *Circles of Healing*. In Gaza, under the coordination of Shimaa Abu Qamar, this took shape as Spinning Women's Hearts, a workshop teaching women to crochet small objects and to journal as complementary practices of healing. In Kabul, coordinated by Sughra Zuhad, the same impulse gave rise to a Circle of Mental Wellness alongside Omid-e-Noor ("the hope of light"), a project to build a children's library in Malistan. In Tanzania, the Circle of Healing model developed with the women of Sinai inspired a parallel initiative at NEMCA for single mothers, coordinated by Agnes Haule. And in Norway, in coordination with Indigenous partners in Latin America (Elsy Curihuinca Neira (Chile, Mapuche) and Giulia Parola (Brazil, in representation of the Tariana women of the Amazonas)) the team is coordinating a Circle of Healing for Indigenous Women, to be implemented in February 2026. Alongside this expanding network of community-based work, the team remains committed to translating these experiences into scientific and public-facing output: the Silent Book, preliminarily accepted by Multifoco's Igarapé

Series, is being finalised, together with a co-authored book project directed by Dana Ahmed, bringing together many of the participants across these initiatives as co-authors.



Figure 19 Display of the final results from the workshop developed by Shimaa Abu Qamar, Gaza, August, 2026. Photo credit: Shimaa Abu Qamar.

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Websites

https://asfourinitiative.org

The ECO_CARE Project

ECO_CARE Instagram profile

Faculty of Law, UiT The Arctic University of Norway

The Ocean Decade Blue Catalyst (bLYSs)

Ocean Incubator Network

Follow Your Heart

Asfour Initiative 26' Project Video - Musra

Appendix:

Sarah Mohmaed (Swaidraws) Puppet Show Certifications:





Figures 20-23 Illustrated diplomas. Created by Sarah Mohamed with children's illustrations.

Zainab Mutreb's Untranslated Written Reflections:

انا زينب مطرب

لدى ٢٨ سنه

مواليد 16/1/1998

حاصلة على ليسانس اداب لغة عربية

متزوجة ولدى طفلان مراد ومعاذ

انا مدرسة فى المركز التعليمى لحبيبة انا واستاذة الاء زميلتي فى المركز التعليمى وهى ايضا معلمة لغة عربية

نحن نعمل معا فى المركز التعليمى المركز منقسم لقسمين قسم للاطفال الكبار وهو يوم السبت والاثنين والأربعاء

قسم للاطفال الصغار يوم الأحد والثلاثاء والخميس

وفى قسم الأطفال الكبار قسمنا الأطفال لمجموعتين مجموعة الأطفال من سن 11و12 هذه المجموعه تابعة لى

ومجموعة الأطفال من 9 و 10 تابعة للمعلمة آلاء

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وفى قسم الأطفال الصغار من سن 5 و6 هذه المجموعة تابعة لى ومن سن 7 و8 تابعة لمعلمة آلاء

وقد علمنا بقدوم دانة وفرح للمركز التعليمى وكنا متحمسين انا والمعلمة آلاء لقدومهن ولقد كانن على قد هذا الحماس
لقد كانت فترة وجودهن من اجمل واحسن الفترات التى مرت علينا فى المركز التعليمى ولقد شعرنا ايضا بحماس الأطفال وسعادتهم

وليس الأطفال فقط من هم كانوا سعداء بل نحن ايضا كنا كالاطفال معهن وشاركنا فى انشطتهم وتحمسنا معهم

ولقد كنا ايضا نستمع الى قصص الأنبياء عندما كانت دانة تلقيهم على الأطفال ولقد كنت استمع إليها بانتباه مع العلم إنى اعرفها جيدا ولكن كان إلقاء دانه زاد للقصة الحماس والإثارة

وكانت المواضيع التى كانت تلقيها رائعة ولكن كانت توجد إعاقة واحدة وهى اللهجة والحمد لله تم حلها لقد كنت اوصل بعض الألفاظ للاطفال بالمعنى المتعارف عليه عند البدوى والأفكار المتعارف عليها فى مجتمعنا وكنا كالاسرة والقلب الواحد المترابط
وكان فى عروض مسرحية وكانت هذه العروض الشئ الجميل والمحمس لنهاية الأسبوع وهذه العروض لم تحدث قبل هذا لذلك كان الحماس زائد لهذه العروض وتم مشاركة اغلب الأطفال فى هذه العروض
والجميل فى هذا ايضا انه تم مشاركة المعلمات فى هذا العرض وذهبنا الى البحر رغم ان هذا غير متعارف عليه فى مجتمعنا إننا نذهب للبحر بدون الرجل ولكن قامت دانة بحل هذه المشكله وقالت سنذهب لبحر لا يوجد عليه رجال وكانت المرة الأولى التى اذهب فيها مع بنات اول مرة اتعرف عليهم ولكن كانت تجربة ولا اروع

وما يقال على هذه التجربة قليل جدا ولا يكفى بالتحدث عنه فى كتاب لقد كانت مشاعرنا جميلة وسعيدين بهذه التجربة
وحتى المعلمة آلاء كانت تستغرب من وجودى على البحر مع الأطفال ولكن شعرت اننى أحببت وجود دانة وفرح لذلك اقنعت زوجى بذهاب وطمأنت قلبه عندما اريته المكان وانه لا يوجد به رجال كانت عروض جميلة جدا وعرض اجمل من عرض وشاركنا انا والمعلمة آلاء فى هذه العروض ايضا

وكما قلت ما يقال عن هذه التجربة قليل جدا وما أخفيه من كلمات جميلة لا يتسعها مقال لذلك تحدثت عن التجربة باختصار بالغ

ولهذه التجربة شق آخر مع دانة وفرح وهو وجودهن ومشاركتهن فى المجتمع حيث طلبن منى ومن الاء ان يتعرفن على المجتمع ورحبنا بهذه الفكره
لقد قمت بعمل اجتماع عند عائلة زوجى وتم التعارف على الموجودين وكل شخص عرف نفسه حتى دانة وفرح عرفوا أنفسهم وكان يوم جميل ورائع وكنا فى غاية السعادة وتم ترتيب ايضا اجتماع اخر عند عائلة زوجى وتم عمل نشاط مع السيدات ولقد قامت فرح بطرح النشاط وهو وضع كف اليد على الورقة ورسمها ووضع فيها أمنية ورسمة وحدث جميل وشخص قريب للقلب وشى اخر ولكن نسيته وقمنا بهذه التجربة وكانت جميله ولقد شاركت ايضا فى هذه التجربة وعرضت ايضا على دانة وفرح ان يأتوا لوالدتي ولقد عرفتهم على عائلتى واقربائى وكان وقت جميل جدا وفوق الرائع وتم الزيارة لوالدتي مرتين وكانوا دائما مرحبين باى اجتماع وعندهم روح الحماس لأى فكرة

وبهذه التجربة شق آخر وهو شق شخصى ضمن التجربة فى المجتمع وهو زيارة دانة وفرح لبيتي رغم بُعد بيتى ووجوده فى المزارع دون وجود احد بجانبى و على الرغم من هذه العقبات الى انهم لم يتكاسلوا بل قرروا انهم ياتون الى ولقد كنت فى قمة السعادة لوجودهم فى بيتى لقد شعرت بجود روح فى المكان بعد ان كان المكان خالى
ولقد حاولت دانة ان تعلمني الكروشيه فى بيتى وكنت سعيدة جدا بهذه التجربة لمعرفتى شى جديد لذلك قلت من قبل ما أكن به لدانه من مشاعر لا يكفيه كتاب لقد غيرت فكرى عن الناس واظهرت جانب من نفسى لم أكن اعرفه لقد وجدت نفسى مع دانة وظهرت شخصيتى التى اهملتها من سنين مع دانة لذلك لا يكفى كتاب فى وصف مشاعرى لهذه الشخصية الرائعة الجميلة التى أكن لها كل الاحترام والمشاعر الجميلة ولن انسى ايضا فرح لقد كانت مبهجة وجميله ولها شخصيتها الرائعة وكانت تفهم المشاكل بسرعه وتحاول حل ما تستطيع عليه حله دون التذمر وكنت استشيرها فى بعض المواضيع وكان لها شخصيه فى حلها ولها افكار رائعه ايضا

لقد كانن كالامهات بعنايتهن للاطفال وكانن لى كالاخوات ولأول مرة وجدت من اشاركه افكارى ومشاعرى