

## **The Media and Conflict Project**

Now that we have finished the Media project, I am trying to look back to the beginning of the cooperation between the two organizations. The experience was definitely unique, both in terms of the new project and also for us as organization. The most difficult part was how to build confidence between the two partners, because when we say two organizations, it seems like two entities, inside there are many characters and feelings of everyone and a history every staff member has in the conflict. The process of change inside anyone of us is not complete. We have not changed completely, so that we could forget all the suffering and the feeling towards the other. We still struggle from inside to be more peaceful and more nonviolent. Reconciliation is a process and we are in the process, we have not reached it, in the meantime we are trying to bring people to the process (participants). So while we have our internal conflicts and internal processes, we are also involved in the other process between us and our partners in conflict and the two processes influence each other. We at the Center for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation (CCRR) started working on joint projects, organized by one Israeli and one Palestinian organization, when most of these kind of projects were controlled by the Israeli side, whether financially, in terms of administration, or professionally, even defining the meeting places and time. The reputation of this kind of work had negative effects and we have to struggle to gain back respect it. Because of that and because we believe in the values of real partnership and respect to the two sides, we at CCRR do not accept to work in an Israeli-Palestinian project unless the following is provided:

- 1) The project idea is established jointly to suit the need of the two peoples and the organizations.
- 2) The project proposal is developed together, with a clear written agreement between the two organizations.
- 3) Administration and finances in the project are completely equal.
- 4) Preparation meetings will be held in both places, even when the army does not want Israelis to enter Palestine.
- 5) Joint meetings will be held by the two organizations before starting any project, so they can learn about each others' philosophy and style of work.
- 6) Each side will be introduced to the staff of the other side who will participate in the project.
- 7) Each side is introduced to the other side's methodology and model of work.
- 8) Each side has to be willing to develop a new model of work that fits the other side's model of work, culture, experience, and the project's subject.

The School for Peace agreed to these principles before we began to work with each other. However, to agree to something is only the first step, to implement it is more difficult. I think that for us Palestinians to participate in joint projects is not just work, it is a national responsibility, it means to present the suffering of our people, it is a struggle to change people and to bring them

to the peace camp, to make some of them peace activists, in short, this is a mission of life. Our first struggle with partner organizations is based on the fact that many of them think that Palestinians are still weak and that they are helping them by adopting them instead of being real equal partners. This makes our job more difficult, as we have to achieve this balance in a completely unbalanced situation. We have to prove our professionalism and our ability to administrate a project... not only to the donors but also to the partners, and sometimes even to participants, as some of them are affected by the stereotypes about our work.

For me it is an educational process to talk about the Palestinian issue, the Palestinian situation, the Palestinian suffering; I am not only a facilitator or coordinator, I am also a messenger. Every work has a meaning for me, I consider my words carefully and try to include as much information as I can. How I introduce myself, for example, is very important, I include the Palestinian narrative, I am Noah Salameh, a refugee, a prisoner, educated.... All this has to reach the participants, especially the Israelis who connect prisoners to terror. So I tell them that I am a refugee and prisoner, educated, a peace activist and that there is no contradiction in all of that.

According to the above conditions, initial meetings were conducted between CCRR and the School of Peace at Neve Shalom. The then-directors of the School of Peace, Nava Sonnenschein and Rabah Halaby, and the director of CCRR Noah Salameh and Sana Radwan, the Project Coordinator, attended those meetings. The dialogue was sometimes a little difficult, since each side looked at things from their point of view. The School of Peace wanted to focus on the goal of raising awareness and interest while CCRR wanted the goal of the joint work to be changing the participants and affecting their attitudes and opinions regarding the conflict, especially on the Israeli side. CCRR had a clear and explicit goal - to affect the public opinion and change the stereotypes about Palestinians, and influence their political opinions. We are a nonviolence organization and our goal is to change people's behavior, opinions and attitudes towards others and to bring them to the peace activities. Finally, both sides agreed that the goals were not contradictory and so each side should focus on their objectives and try to achieve them.

After the initial discussions, we moved to the next step - meetings between the facilitators and the staff of both organizations in order to know each other and the style of the other's work. This was not only achieved through dialogue but also through joint workshops in which each organization presented its way of facilitation with the aim of combining both ways to find a new joint model for our project. A workshop was conducted in November 2004 at the Moevenpick Hotel at the Dead Sea in Jordan.

In this workshop, 20 people participated from each organization. Two people were responsible for the facilitation in the workshop, one from the School of

Peace and one from CCRR. For me, Noah Salameh, as a facilitator it was one of the most difficult experiences I have ever had. I have been working in facilitation for 15 years, (this is also the age of Neve Shalom) but here all the participants were themselves facilitators and discussed everything in its most tiny detail, so imagine how difficult it was, given our different styles of facilitation.. For example, the Israeli facilitator usually allowed quick responses between the participants without interfering, while I am used to interfering to organize the discussion in order to allow a bigger number of participants to voice their opinions. This is important especially for the ones who do not know how to enter a discussion without permission. There were also problems which arose on the Israeli side. They had Palestinians with Israeli ID, who argued with the Palestinians from the West Bank. This was the first time I ever faced such a situation and maybe it had to do with the School of Peace's way of facilitation. This workshop proved the importance of introducing the two organizations to each other in order to build a new way of facilitation that fits the two organizations with their needs, mission, culture, and laws. But I have to say that in this workshop I learned a new Hebrew word which I will never forget 'hitnasut', meaning arrogance. I felt that both the Jewish and the Palestinian participants from Neve Shalom were patronizing us and trying to prove that we are less experienced, less professional and even less developed. This put me in a challenging position for the whole project and I became very strict in measuring things, especially during the first months until we build confidence between us (Michal and me) as coordinators. Now that the project has finished, I think it is very important and necessary for Palestinians to be strong, professional and careful, if they work jointly or not to work together at all.

After this workshop, each organization became more aware of the other organization's philosophy and style of work and model. The most important points that became clear:

1. The School of Peace works on improving the relationship between Palestinians inside the Green Line and Jews, and it developed its philosophy in this field.
2. The School of Peace concentrates on raising the awareness regarding conflict issues.
3. The School of Peace thought to be more experienced than CCRR.
4. The School of Peace was used to work with Palestinian NGOs where they are alone responsible for administrating the projects from all aspects and they train the Palestinian facilitators.
5. The School of Peace concentrated on working with closed groups, concentrating on the track inside one group not allowing any new members to become part of it.
6. CCRR works on two levels, inside the Palestinian society concentrating on trying to change the behavior, opinions and values, or at least affect them.

On the second track, CCRR conducts meetings between Palestinians and Israelis as two sides of the conflict.

7. CCRR's work concentrates on trying to change the Israeli public opinion and affecting the Jewish participants' opinion about the Palestinians and how to treat them.
8. CCRR made a condition on equally dividing the work's finances, administration, and content from all aspects with the partner.
9. Although CCRR is a younger organization than the School of Peace, the facilitators who work with CCRR are experienced, and the director of CCRR has been working for 15 years in partnership projects with equal contributions.
10. CCRR is flexible when working with groups, and changes from closed groups to open ones, and uses more than one shape, which is more affective in discussions.

In reference to these points, the disagreement between the two organizations seemed so big that they felt working together would be impossible. We had to work on ourselves before we worked with our target group. It is very important to go through the process and internalize it before we begin to facilitate, even before we decided the details of the program. Only through the continuous meetings, working on ourselves and very importantly the flexibility of the project directors, Michal and Noah, helped in building a new model that works with the philosophy and the objectives of both organizations, especially after the joint workshop in which the differences aroused and even confrontations, as mentioned above. Despite all of that, the project continued, and every time each side listened to the other without judging, so we were able to build a new foundation in our joint cooperation. And I can say that the initial feeling after finishing the first workshop (for the staff) was negative, and after we as project directors conducted meetings for the project, analyzed the workshop and discussed how to build a new partner project, I confess that Michal's flexibility surprised me very much and it was this positive surprise which helped a lot in building the project not on the School of Peace's nor on CCRR's way but on both organizations' way and philosophy of work, culture, and need. It was also very suitable for the journalists who worked for the first time with the School for Peace and CCRR. In contrast to closed groups, the project was decided to be:

1. A workshop for the group facilitated by two main facilitators in which introduction and ice-breaking takes place.
2. The group is divided into two groups; each group has 14-15 participants from both groups and each is facilitated by two facilitators. Each group discusses topics related to media and conflict.
3. The participants in the two groups go back to the bigger group. Two presentations take place by the organizations about the importance of working together, its history, privileges, and difficulties.

4. The group is divided into uni-national groups, in which each group prepares a presentation about the media of each side. After presenting what each group prepared, a discussion is held.
5. The group is divided into a smaller group. Each group works on making a dictionary about the expressions used by each side and finding whether there is a way that could be agreed upon.

The strength of this model is that all these forms of meetings are completing one another that it is moving from one form to another in a smooth process. Also it gives the participants the opportunity to take a breath from one meeting to another and from the other participants. On the other hand, not all the participants appreciate the same style of meetings. For example, if someone is strong in the large forum, another one may be stronger in the small groups, so we give everyone an opportunity. At CCRR we do not believe that any model something holy, to be used in each setting and for every subject or target group, rather we have to find the most suitable model each time.

We applied four main settings of work in this project:

- 1) The big group: There is no doubt that the big group is a new form development for the work in joint meetings. In the past, workshops used to take place only in small groups, as if we were putting the participants in a laboratory away from the external factors and then they go back to the reality after a few days of the workshop. However, the new development is that the participants in the small groups do not disconnected from reality. The conflict with its details and elements are found in the meeting hall but diminutively, it is a real simulation. The difference is that those meetings change the power balance from bombs, media channels, and big organizations and the people who are the real owners of the conflict appear. This creates a balance throughout the meeting; the Israeli side loses its military excellence while the Palestinian side becomes distinguished in its concentration upon the ethical and human side of the conflict. Thus the focus turns to the individual person, whose measurements can judge reality, the word 'occupation' becomes a weakness despite its power in the world, and the word 'checkpoint' becomes a shameful thing rather than a symbol for controlling people's lives; this is the power of meetings in big groups. Power measurements differ and the Palestinian side depends on confrontation and tackling the issues on the table, while the Israeli side starts avoiding this confrontation and usually tries to run away. In the small groups, the Israeli side succeeds in concentrating upon the small details rather than the bigger picture of the reality with the two people, one the occupied and the other the occupier.

The power of the Palestinian media surprised us in its standing in the big groups and talking in the name of Palestine. Therefore, the big group was important for it since the number of listeners is influential and its goal is to reach a bigger number of participants to deliver its message of suffering. As a result, the balance in the big groups has always been more equal and the number of the Palestinians who talk is larger. Their voice was more audible and effective, though the small groups were also important in preparation and discussing what was happening in the bigger group. The big group became the center of the workshop, but the small group was complementary for the process. This set-up is in contrast to the former models that used to consider the small groups as the main focus.

- 2) Two mixed small groups: These groups were used to enable the participants to discuss certain topics. This gave an opportunity to the participants who did not get the chance to talk in the big groups. It also enabled the participants to prepare the details and issues that would be discussed in the big group. And it gave the participants a chance to build relations, to know more about one another and to decrease the tension in the big groups, even build a work relation in this form.
- 3) Uni-national groups: These groups were used for preparation and not only for expressing feelings, as used to be common. Each group used to prepare what it will present to the other group. For example, each group prepared a presentation about media, its methods, and different aspects, which was presented and discussed in the large forum. This made the small groups and big ones complementary to each other. Also this form enabled the Palestinian group to work more on their internal relations, especially because the Palestinians who have Israeli IDs joined the Palestinian group, and they learned from each other. I think that this forum is very important because it helps the national group to prepare and establish themselves as a group. Also it helps to develop internal discussions inside every group and teaches them to accept the differences inside the group, which is not common on the Palestinian side.
- 4) Small specialized groups: In these groups, certain topics were discussed chosen by the participants and the facilitators. The topics were discussed and the results of the discussion were presented to the large group and discussed there again. This turned the big group to the center of the workshop, like a UN body, giving reference to all the decisions and laws for anything. The discussions held in the small, specialized, and uni-national groups were always presented to the big group, and then discussed there, giving remarks and reaching decisions.

The two organizations developed a new way that fits them and their experience and cultures. The experience has proved to be successful. It gave the participants a good chance to meet each other in the big groups and

exchange the experiences and opinions, and talk about their pains, hopes, suffering, and complaints to the other side. This workshop goes further than dialogue between the participants - to negotiate, confront and cooperate. At the same time, the smaller groups gave a chance to participants who cannot or dislike talking in the big group and express themselves more effectively.

One of the challenges of the project was to establish a group of experts on whom the project was to be built. We selected 20 participants, 10 from each side. The situation at the time was not encouraging for discussing joint projects with Israelis. It was a big challenge to find Palestinian experts and participants. Some Palestinians think that such meetings are a form of 'normalization' and are careful not to participate in such meetings. Therefore, just mentioning the subject to some journalists who might reject to participate will affect the project because they talk to each other and influence each other. As a result, CCRP worked very carefully on preparing this project and we were surprised by the approval of the idea by the experts we contacted; in fact there were many who were unexpectedly excited about the idea of the project. Some journalists helped us in reaching other journalists through recommending them to us. It is important to mention that on the one hand, such projects require high communication skills and a very persuasive way of explaining the project, which concentrates on the balance of relationships and the freedom of press to express themselves and their issues. On the other hand, the challenge was after choosing the participants, to administer and organize the project by both organizations as agreed. There should be a balance between both organizations and the ability of the facilitators to respond to the different needs in organizing the discussion and the flexibility in opening the field to them to express their opinions along with their commitment to the project and the program of the workshop. All of this needs highly qualified facilitators, especially for the big meetings when we have more than forty participants together. It was important to keep a balance between controlling interruptions and allowing free contributions from all of participants, to make sure that those participants who speak a lot do not dominate all the discussions and to encourage those who do not speak a lot.

I do not exaggerate when I say that I was very worried during the first workshop because the entire project depended on the outcome of this first workshop. I was watching the expressions and the reactions of the participants all the time and I tried to evaluate their feelings from their conversations in the breaks or during meals. The next day. The model is new, the media people are different from others, they are talkative, strong and used to confrontation. I felt very happy because of the success of the program and the positive reactions of the participants. At the end of the workshop in the evaluation, the participants reflected satisfaction about the project and showed their willingness to participate in other workshops. They were also ready to help in the project and recommend other potential participants. At that moment I was very much relieved and I wanted to share my happiness

and satisfaction, and to deeply think of the four last days to keep the memories in my mind in order to be able to paraphrase it in an experience that would help in the continuation of the project.

Finally, I would like to say that I think that the first secret for the success of this project was in the balanced work from both sides in work, designing the idea, building the program, the qualifications of the facilitators, their experience in partner projects and their flexibility in dealing with the other side and with the participants. And I do not deny that my discussions with Michal and Rabah were increasing my confidence that this partnership is right and both organizations are well qualified to cooperate positively and are able to handle self-criticism and the criticism of each other without too much sensitivity. I think that this experience should be an example for other organizations who wish to work in such projects and to consider the other side's sensitivity, and respect its culture and abilities. For example, our partnership reached to the level of reserving the hotel. This was the first time that the Palestinian side through a Palestinian agent did the reservations. Usually the reservation takes place through an Israeli agent thinking that they are more qualified and experienced, but this is not always true, and there are Palestinian agents who can do the work at least as effectively as any Israeli agent.

The balance between both organizations in work and the administrative and cultural level reflected upon the participants. This also created a balance in the meetings, discussions, topics, and gave confidence to both sides to be more self critical, which often does not exist in such projects.

One of the most important goals is to create a model for a peaceful partnership between the different parties. It should be built on a healthy and strong basis in order to reflect an image for the participants to be proud of. If this is not the case, the relationship between the parties will be as non-balanced as it is in reality. The participants search for alternatives to their reality and if they do not find such alternatives in workshops whose aim is to develop peace and balanced relations, then there will be no benefit to them. This obviously needs qualified administration and facilitators.

This is what happened in the project. Many participants were affected positively through observing the change that occurred to many of them, in their style of work, in their dealing with the other side, and their way of transmitting the news. I remember one of the Israeli journalists saying to me "You totally changed me. Since I became a journalist, I have never used any Palestinian source for my news but from now on, I will not write any piece of news unless I consult with my Palestinian colleagues about the source." I think this example clearly shows the extent of the project's effect on the participants. Also the fact that most of the participants are still in contact with us and many of them came to the conference we held later, and even many

others would like to come again to these encounter means that they were affected and the project caused them to change. I also know that many of them still visit each other and help each other with work when they need information or good sources.

The question which still in my mind is how we can use this experience to expand this work and to build on it. In my opinion, it is very important to take this project and make it an example of balanced partnership in joint work. I think that this project is not just a good work on media, peace and conflict, but it is also an example on equal partnership in a conflict situation.