

Beyond Neutrality

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From his experience in the field, the writer asks if politically neutral NGOs can really promote peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

As a peace activist and facilitator for groups in conflict, I have tried to find out what makes people become active in fighting for justice and equality for minorities living among them, especially in intractable conflicts such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and what it takes for an individual process to translate into social change. From my experience, after participating in different dialogue programs with both Palestinians and Jewish settlers, *I have realized that while some grassroots NGOs are driven by an explicit political agenda, such as Combatants for Peace ("lead a non-violent struggle against the **occupation**"), other dialogue promoting NGOs, such as the Peres Center for Peace (PCP) and Search For Common Ground (SFCG), operate under an alleged neutrality and avoid declaring any political objectives.*

While studying in the Glocal program, I have become more aware of the international interests driving conflict and peace and more specifically of peace reconciliation programs which use dialogue as a tool for social change. An especially good case study is the American intervention programs that promote reconciliation in Israel and Palestine. In this program, discrepancies between the mission statement and the reality on the ground can be found in two levels: On the macro level, there's a noticeable gap between the formal support of peace, as stated by the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) formal mission, according to which they are "committed to supporting a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict", and the de facto U.S. foreign policy of opposing that commitment by, for example, vetoing the Palestinian statehood bid in the U.N. Moreover, on the micro level, there are differences between the formal mission of the USAID, the political objectives of the NGOs that it supports and the agenda leading their field workers in the field.

In this column, I will focus on some of those dynamics, based on the literature, my experience in dialogue work, and interviews conducted with SFCG's CEO, Mrs. Sharon Rosen, and with an educational program manager in the PCP, Mrs. Mili Midlash Romi. I would like to challenge the school of thought claiming that politically neutral dialogue programs preserve and perpetuate Jewish dominance and control while encouraging Arab submissiveness and passivity. I would like to call for a different school of thought, which suggests an alternative to the political-neutral characteristic of the existing USAID financed dialogue programs, yet would acknowledge explicitly that real coexistence can only be achieved by a political change in the current power relations.

The literature defines 4 types of dialogue models, based on programs conducted in Israel Palestine since the 1980s, and their evolution: 1) the Coexistence Model, which emphasizes interpersonal similarities and cultural and lingual commonalities 2) the Joint Projects Model, which focuses on building partnerships based on common interests 3) the Confrontational Model that focuses on forming dialogue dedicated to speaking about the conflict and the atrocities it entails and 4) The Narrative model, which aims to reconstruct the narrative about the conflict while encouraging a greater awareness among Jewish participants regarding the asymmetrical relations between Israelis and Palestinians.

A common critique found in the literature about encounters of the first and second type is their intentional perpetuation of existing asymmetrical power relations by focusing on changing individual-level prejudices while ignoring the collective and institutionalized bases of discrimination. The preferred model for USAID financed programs such as SFCG and the PCP is the 2nd type of 'the Joint Projects Model'. According to Rosen, "this type is chosen because SFCG does not only bring people together in dialogue but also aims to initiate concrete actions that affect reality". An example for political neutrality, or refraining the political sphere in this type of dialogue, can be seen in how SFCG transforms the "blaming and shaming" discourse (which includes using terms like colonialism, occupation and terror), into a dialogue which instead promotes a use of emotional expressions like sad, angry and hopeful, thus ignoring the reality of discrimination and segregation of the conflict.

Furthermore, In their operation of this dialogue model, both NGOs remain apolitical in their mission statement, in contrary to one of their biggest funders, the USAID, which explicitly promotes a specific solution to the conflict (the two state solution). According to a personal communication with Romi in November 2016, this political neutrality is beneficial [not only to the donors, but also] to the NGO's interests as there is an opportunity [by being apolitical] to reach more people, who wouldn't come to promote an agenda they oppose had one been formally stated. Meaning, as the goal of these organizations is educational; this political neutrality offers the ability to attract the general public and expand the circles of impact, including people with different political views, such as Jewish settlers and Hamas supporters, who often refrain from it.

Hence, nonpolitical encounters between Jews and Arabs, leave an open framework that can be shaped by specific political agendas supported by the educators on the ground. Different actors operating in these frameworks can push forward their own agendas, even if they contradict the specific political agenda of the donors. For example, as dialogue cannot be fully supervised by the donors or board members, over the various sessions the educators can lead the beneficiaries to understand the asymmetric power relations of the conflict, abstaining from the political neutrality.

Unlike politically neutral NGOs, explicitly political NGOs, which many times are funded by the same donors (such as USAID) are less inclusive of people who hold different political agendas but are clearer in the message they promote. In contrast to PCP and SFCG, such political NGOs usually would not be appealing for people who do recognize

the Occupation, for example. This approach off course does not attract the same number of people, but it allows a stronger engagement in an active political change.

The different dynamics between NGOs, donors and their beneficiaries in intractable conflicts are complex and ever-changing. Dialogue programs in a reality of violent conflict cannot be apolitical, nor can agendas which promote peace. In the NGO's declared vision statement, this alleged neutrality may bring into dialogue people with various political views, and should be expanded in numbers to reach bigger impact in society. On the ground level, ignoring the power relations that shape the conflict would just contribute to its status quo. Politically driven NGOs have a lot to learn from alleged politically neutral NGOs on how to include more segments of the societies into the dialogue process, but the latter have to come up with a more structured strategy, to spurt their participants into real action and promote a very clear goal - the end of the conflict – as political as that may sound.

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