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Project Hope; A Case Study on The Role of Education in Peace and Conflict Resolution
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1. PROJECT HOPE.

Humanitarian Opportunities for Peace and Education, or Project HOPE is a grassroots NGO (Non Governmental Organisation) that has operated in the West Bank city of Nablus for five years. Set up in July 2003 by a group of Palestinian and international volunteers, who had all been involved in solidarity work in Palestine in different ways, it drew us together because of our deep belief in non-violence and the role of education in empowering a population.

Having been involved in a lot of reactive non-violent activities within the country we wanted to create something more positive and long term in response to the needs and wishes of the Palestinians who we met and with whom we were working. There was at that time, and still is today, a demand to learn English. The two main reasons being that people can, firstly, communicate with the global community about what has happened to them and, secondly, they can increase their chances of getting better education and jobs.

Project Hope is a non-profit volunteer organisation. Its goal is to provide a participatory, educational space for Palestinian youth and children. Committed to the principles of international humanitarian law and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the main approach is to support children denied access to basic services by providing educational and recreational activities, medical and humanitarian relief and practical training so as to empower them with hope and skills for the future.

The project's staff structure and mode of operation is quite unique. Unlike some humanitarian or aid organisations, we focus on in-country leadership. Although the Executive Director is Canadian, there are only two other international staff one of whom lives in Nablus and is married to a Nablusi. All the other staff on the ground, taking the daily decisions and leading the organisation, are Palestinian. This is important both for the integrity of the project and the long-term aim of skills development amongst the adult population. To further the latter, instead of having a Project Hope building in all the refugee camps, villages and other areas where we work, which would be prohibitively expensive, we cooperate with partner centres such as UNRWA² schools, community centres, universities, colleges and women's centres etc.

2. BRIDGE TO THE WORLD.

Skilled international volunteers are recruited to spend up to nine months in Nablus teaching on a variety of programmes under the aegis of Bridge to the World. This provides courses in English and French both in the classroom and through broader interactive methods using multimedia skills such as blogging and E-Pals, social justice, arts and First Aid. Email penpals is the only way to get a penpal in a country with no

¹ Jenny received support from the MPF R. J. Barker Fund for peace activities on the West Bank and spoke to the Conference Meeting at Loughborough in July 2003.

² **United Nations Relief and Works Agency** for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

real access to the international postal system. Volunteers have to cover all their own expenses or apply for scholarships and internships but there is no charge or fee to participate. This means there is a wider variety of volunteers who can get involved and it isn't limited to the privileged who can afford to pay to volunteer.

Getting international volunteers to teach vital skills to the Palestinians opens up many opportunities to bring peace in Palestine. Helping the students to feel part of the global community, especially through our new Bridge to the World programme makes them aware of the wider world, gives them a vision of what can be achieved and access to a large number of people who really care about them. Many Palestinians feel that they are a forgotten people and that no-one is active in supporting them. Volunteers show them there are others who care. This increases their hope and realisation that a different future is possible. On the other side by providing young students around the world with a direct and personal link to a Palestinian student by emails the negative stereotype perpetrated by the media equating "Palestinian" with "suicide bomber" is broken. Empathy is thus created through the realisation on both sides that the "other" is just like "me"!

The international volunteers can have a hard time; classes are cancelled when the soldiers invade the cities, students may be arrested (or worse) by the soldiers, some volunteers have been refused access to the country by the Israeli security services – though what threat to security teaching could possibly be has never been ascertained - and two have been, very briefly, kidnapped by Palestinians. But hundreds of international volunteers have experienced life under occupation, have made lasting friendships and been inspired to educate others about the reality of life in Palestine. Many have returned to teach again or run their own programme.

Our most obvious "peace education" programme began over two years ago with the establishment of "Rights and Democracy", a Social Justice Thematic Workshops funded by a Canadian organisation. Working for peace in Palestine is full of challenges that are directly associated with it being a country under occupation where the usual avenues within the society are unavailable. Project Hope therefore has to adapt its programmes to take account of this. Whilst Amnesty International has some great teaching materials for such a programme, they aren't necessarily appropriate in Palestine. To make their materials relevant to accessing your rights whilst living under a violent occupation the materials were re-written by a Palestinian who had studied for a Masters in Peace and Conflict Resolution in Spain. This programme has now worked successfully with hundreds of students, encouraging them not only to learn about their rights and identify where they are being eroded or denied, but to work actively for them both within their community and further afield. Through meeting people working in the field of law, such as the local lawyers and activists from the Justice Centre who took part in the programme over the summer, youths are inspired to see that as a future career.

Whilst Project Hope is best known in the West Bank for the work that it does with children and youth, there are two other demographic groups with whom it is involved, namely women and professionals (although obviously these are not mutually exclusive).

i **Women.** All too often the rights and roles of women are neglected when oppression of an entire population is being countered. Those challenging the occupation in whatever way, be it through demonstrating and campaigning back home or taking part in NVDA³ solidarity actions and accompaniment in Palestine, have their attention on challenging the occupation as a whole. There is a strong tendency to idealise the Palestinians and ignore any problems within Palestinian society – or take the view that those problems can only be solved "after occupation". There is another view which is two-fold.

Firstly, the rights of all Palestinians are valid and valuable and no-one should be suffering through a lack of those rights be it as a result of internal or external oppression.

Secondly, by empowering and supporting all those within a community or society you create a situation where the population as a whole is stronger and more cohesive and therefore better able to fight the external oppression.

³ Non-violent Direct Action

The focus on women has been important, made even more so by the fact that as the lives of the men are so tightly controlled by the occupation forces they react by tightening their own control upon their families – especially the women within those families.

Due to the structure of the communities in which we work it would be inappropriate to openly challenge this situation, instead Project Hope takes a more pro-active role and has started to run education programmes directly with women's centres and groups in deprived areas. These include teaching English at the "mothers' schools" established to provide women with basic maths and English so they are better able to support their children with their homework, teaching art and running basic first aid training. Taking the latter as an example, there are multiple ways that such classes benefit the women, their children, and the wider community as a whole.

Since November 2007 we have been running a First Aid and Healthy Living Initiatives programme for women in refugee camps, villages and deprived areas of Nablus. The programme was created by two volunteers. A nurse from the USA who had been doing nurse training in one of the Nablus hospitals identified a need for basic first aid training through her contact with women there. Working with her was a first aid volunteer from the UK. These classes offer peer support as the women who are often isolated in their homes are able to come together. They provide vital skills in a country where there are massive physical and economic barriers to health care treatment. They provide simple first aid skills that can really save lives and enhance the position of the women in their community because the results of using the skills they learn can be seen by all.

As well as giving the classes information in healthy living initiatives has been provided along with basic health checks such as blood pressure to give the women a sense of being able to take control of one aspect of their life, their health and diet, when so much is outside of their control. More than 500 women have so far benefited from these classes, and we have often been delivering them in areas to which the local medical services and first aid trainers are unable to travel. For example in Beit Dejan just outside of Nablus where a trainer from the Palestinian Red Crescent Society was illegally detained by the Israeli soldiers when he tried to reach the village. Our team was only able to get through the checkpoint due to the presence of the internationals involved in the teaching. An additional advantage of working with women is the chance to influence a large number of people, the women in our classes had up to 15 children together with many of their extended families. For both cultural and economic reasons the potential number of beneficiaries of the skills taught is massive.

ii **Professional Development.** The denial of freedom of movement to many Palestinians does not only disrupt daily life within the country, but has stopped thousands from travelling abroad to access further educational or professional development. This has led to a reduction in the skills base of many professions. The hesitancy about travelling to the country by internationals who could offer skills training only further compounds this. Project Hope is helping to break this down in two ways, through developing networking between Palestinians and international organisations who can help with training sometimes at a distance and, at the same time, providing local educational support to those who need training. In the summer of 2008 a French language programme was run at the Rafidia Hospital in Nablus for a team of doctors and nurses who were planning to spend some time in France gaining professional training in their field. Another course along these lines was English classes for trainee lawyers with more being planned for 2009.

Another aspect of the programme comes through our work with local volunteers, mostly young unemployed Palestinians or university students. They spend a lot of time at the Project Hope office meeting and socialising with internationals, acting as translators and companions⁴ in classes and developing their own skills and confidence in teaching. As well as creating lasting friendships, some locals have used the experience and skills to get scholarships abroad or work for NGOs in Nablus. Such a one is Shereen who volunteered as a translator whilst studying French at university and who now works as a translator for

⁴ Also EAPPI (Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel) has provided an opportunity for volunteers to stand along side those who might otherwise suffer oppression, discrimination and unjust treatment at places like crossing points into Israel. Three Methodists are listed in the current Prayer Handbook on Day 15. Rev. Enid Gordon is a member of the Methodist Peace Fellowship. She issues a news letter, for a copy email her enidgordon@googlemail.com.

Medicine sans Frontier. This organisation uses Arabic-French translators in its psychiatric work with traumatised youth. Students from the medical school have been translating for the first aid classes giving them a chance to practice their English that is essential for accessing further training, and at the same time, gaining experience of working with people.

3. POSTSCRIPT.

Running a grassroots organisation in an occupied country is fraught with problems. These are overcome when possible as they arise. Staff and volunteers, both national and international, have made personal sacrifices to keep the project running because at the end of the day we can all see the results as children and others learn, laugh and gain a bit more hope about their future.

Jenny Gaiawyn has been a peace and environmental activist since 1996 in the UK, Palestine and Iraq. At present she is in Edinburgh continuing work with Project Hope and volunteering with the Red Cross while she begins work on a PhD in Climate Change. She is available to give presentations on many issues relating to this work and can be contacted at jenpalestine@yahoo.ie. For information about her non-Project Hope work in Palestine visit <http://jaidigi.livejournal.com> and www.through-the-eyes.org.uk. More information on Project Hope may be found on their web site www.projecthope.ps.

PRAYER

God, as the Father of us all, you have made us brothers and sisters though from many nations with our different languages, skins colours, facial characteristics and cultures developed over the centuries. May we learn that the "others" are really just like "us", with the same needs and not least the need to be loved and to know someone cares. Help us to take our cue from you for you have expressed your love for the world and all of us in a very special way through Jesus, your Son, our Brother. **Amen**

Note from the Secretary. (01743 873 633 mhw@surfree.co.uk, 3, Cornwall Dr. Shrewsbury, SY3 0EP)

There are three things I want to say.

1. Thank you to all who responded so generously to Alan's appeal for contributions. We have perhaps neglected what he did methodically every year from the beginning. This should enable us to publish for 2009. On the other hand we would not like to think anyone feels they must give up P21C because of the money, especially during these difficult times. Some have been able to contribute more so that others may also receive it. Thanks.
2. Apologies for lateness of the last one for those receiving by post. I hope the problem has been sorted out.
3. Another apology which should have appeared last time. The summer issue by Alan, "An Idea whose Time has come" contained an unfortunate dislocation of text for which I must accept responsibility. I think it only appeared in those posted. It occurred during transfer into .pdf for the printer. If you have not worked it out already this is the solution. The section beginning with part of the word on line 2, page 2 to to line 9 before "ho" should be place on page 3, line 9 between "resigned" and "started".

Maurice

PS Please look at our new website, <http://www.mpf.org.uk>. Thanks to Prof. Peter Brophy.

RESPONSE FORM To: John Young, Shalfleet, Dunston Heath, Stafford, ST18 9AN

I enclose £..... as a contribution towards the costs of "Peace in the 21st Century". [Cheques payable to the Methodist Peace Fellowship, please. If you would like a receipt, please tick here.....]

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