Journeys of a secular organisation in south Lebanon

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A secular NGO's experiences in south Lebanon demonstrate that it is possible for non-faith-based organisations to develop productive relationships with faith-based actors without compromising their secular identities.

Religion and faith are important factors which influence governance, social practices and beliefs affecting child protection. Child protection organisations – such as Swiss NGO Terre des hommes Foundation (Tdh) – have therefore sought to engage with religious discourses and faith-based actors to combat different forms of violence against children. Many have experienced tensions and difficulties, however, when carrying out child protection programmes in Muslim-majority communities. The experience of Tdh's child protection team working in Palestinian refugee camps and communities of Tyre area in south Lebanon suggests a model of action that enables secular international organisations to engage effectively in situations where they are less likely to be embedded within the local culture of a community and/or where they may be perceived as having an agenda other than that of purely delivering aid.

Tdh, an organisation "free from any political, religious or ethnic bias" according to its Charter, established an office in Lebanon in 1975. Since 2009, it has focused on work in the Palestinian refugee camps of the Tyre area, developing a strong relationship with Palestinian governance and other actors in order to build firm partnerships and encourage decision makers to take ownership of child protection responses. The intervention was based on a needs assessment that concentrated on collecting information while at the same time building networks and explaining that Tdh looked to build partnerships based on trust and empathy, focusing on children's well-being rather than on politics or religion.

Despite this, Tdh encountered several obstacles at the beginning of its work in the Palestinian refugee communities. When staff initially spoke about the project, families and community leaders expressed varying degrees of mistrust. One of the concerns voiced was that Tdh had a hidden agenda to promote Western and/or Christian values. In addition, there was an unwillingness to acknowledge more sensitive child protection risks, such as child sexual abuse or commercial sexual exploitation of children because these were designated as *haram* – shameful and morally unacceptable, and therefore taboo subjects. This was reinforced by the fear that openly acknowledging the existence of such practices would fuel negative perceptions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The measures taken by Tdh to overcome these obstacles can be broadly divided into two categories: the creation of relationships of trust among all concerned stakeholders, regardless of religious or political affiliation, and targeted activities with faith-based actors.

Building trust and engagement

Trust was built through continual, transparent engagement with duty bearers. Crucially this included recognising and regularly meeting with both Palestinian Liberation Organisation-aligned and Al Tahaluf (opposition) governance structures and community members in order to position Tdh unambiguously as a neutral INGO working with everyone. It involved both confidential discussions regarding case management, where all relevant authority structures and individuals were acknowledged and respected, and involvement of the community in all aspects of project development and design.

Importantly, Tdh needed to show as much commitment to getting relationships right inside the organisation as it did

with relationships in the communities. A training and development department was established with the remit not only to ensure consistency in work standards through staff inductions and capacity building but also to capture reflections and facilitate constructive critique of Tdh's processes and practice. This workplace culture of reflection and consideration fed into Tdh's relations with the Palestinian refugee community, and Tdh's secular institutional identity eventually was no longer seen as threatening or subversive. Trust grew and become central to facilitating innovation and creativity in how to better address child protection risks.

In addition to building trust, a number of activities were developed that specifically sought to engage local faith-based actors in fostering a protective environment for Palestinian refugee children. As early as 2010, several Palestinian *imams* expressed a willingness to become more concretely involved in Tdh's project activities. To that end, numerous initiatives were undertaken with *imams*, all of which took place against the background of Tdh being transparent about its non-faith-based institutional identity while at the same time articulating its respect of Islamic values that seek the well-being and protection of children.

Initially the *imams* were invited to meetings and workshops in order to be better connected with governance and civil society actors to enhance child protection networking. This in turn saw doors open for Tdh case workers to strengthen relationships with FBOs which could be resources or referral partners. On a deeper level, certain *imams* were consulted individually in order to provide personalised support and to encourage change by providing religious guidance to selected families who were reluctant to modify harmful behaviours.

Tdh also encouraged *imams* to incorporate specific messages into their Friday sermons. Project staff would meet with the *imam* in order to determine the specific child protection risk to be discussed during the sermon, namely corporal punishment,

early marriage or school dropout, and to agree on the content of the message to be shared. In total, an estimated total audience of 3,800 people were reached through these messages by the end of 2013. Hearing religious leaders openly refer to child protection issues during Friday prayers was a key element in de-stigmatising child protection concerns in the community.

As relationships matured and strengthened, so did the level of access to more delicate and difficult child protection cases such as incest, commercial sexual exploitation of children, child pornography and child abuse. All actors recognised that the nature of child protection work leads to differences of attitude and approach but, having built up relationships of trust, Tdh was able to either eliminate or mitigate potential levels of conflict which could have jeopardised the organisation's capacity to act for children's well-being.

There is a need, however, to be mindful of the lessons learned along the way. Given that trust is built on sharing knowledge and information, there is a risk that the fundamental principles of consent and confidentiality could be compromised. Front-line protection workers need to pay particular attention to ensuring that any individual or organisation involved in case management fully appreciate the value of and uphold informed consent and confidentiality at all times.

As a non-FBO, Tdh's work with the Palestinian refugee communities in south Lebanon illustrates how, in humanitarian settings, diverging personal or organisational faith persuasions need not be determining factors in enabling partnership and collaboration. Rather, trust and empathy function to bind different actors together around common visions for community improvement.

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