

CCDP Project Brief

The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding – No.1/July 2010

The Swiss and Egyptian NGO Dialogue Project

Executive Summary

The Swiss and Egyptian NGO Dialogue Project (SEND) brings together an Egyptian and a Swiss faith-based non-governmental organization (NGO) – one with Muslim and one with Christian references – to engage in a practice-oriented dialogue and undertake joint activities. It rests on the assumption that more cooperation between actors of development will contribute to the enhancement of relations across the countries around the Mediterranean Sea in which differences of values or social orders tend to become salient.

In line with other projects of "Religion and Politics: Initiatives and Applied Research", this approach reflects the historically-rooted observation that debates about religious values or worldviews constructed upon religion tend to divide interlocutors rather than unite their common understanding of the challenges at stake. This is explained by the fact that compromises are often perceived as a capitulation or, in the worst case, a betrayal of one's own value system. In contrast, the methodology used in the project, which is referred to as *Diap Praxis*, suggests that words gain their meaning only through action, and therefore that dialogue involving parties with different worldviews should focus on practical measures. The Swiss Interchurch Aid (HEKS) and the Egyptian Zainab Afify's Organizations (ZAOs) have been involved in meetings and joint activities since 2007. After going through very positive experiences and successfully overcoming critical moments of the dialogue process, the organizations established a solid working relationship and are currently preparing the joint implementation of a summer camp for a group of Swiss and Egyptian youths.

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**CENTRE ON CONFLICT,
DEVELOPMENT AND PEACEBUILDING**

Religion & Politics
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Political Affairs Division IV – Human Security

GENERAL PROJECT INFORMATION

The Swiss and Egyptian NGO Dialogue Project (SEND) brings together an Egyptian and a Swiss faith-based NGO – one with Muslim and one with Christian references – to engage in a practice-oriented dialogue and undertake joint activities. This project is jointly coordinated by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Political Division IV (FDFA-PD IV) and the Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) in Geneva. The project is located within the framework of the "Religion and Politics: Initiatives and Applied Research" programme initiated by the FDFA-PD IV in 2003. The latter is based on one of the thematic areas of focus of Switzerland's promotion of human security, namely the initiatives aimed at contributing to the enhancement of relations and cooperation across countries around the Mediterranean Sea, in which differences of values or social orders tend to become salient. The SEND project explores how cooperation can be enhanced across geographical areas and what are generally described as cultural divides.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

a. Project rationale

Since the beginning of the 21st century, cooperation between European civil society associations (be they secular or Christian faith-based) and organizations with Islamic references rooted in Muslim majority societies has been scarce. The reasons behind the absence of joint efforts and mutual contact are manifold; differences of values, worldviews and religion are the most frequent explanations, in addition to diverse institutional and communication cultures.

The SEND project is part of Switzerland's approach to peace promotion and conflict resolution. Since 2003, Switzerland has facilitated dialogue projects that test the feasibility of cooperation between Western organizations and their counterparts in countries with predominantly Muslim populations. In particular, the Swiss Foreign Ministry, either through its Political Division IV or through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), has sought to gain expertise in faith-based organizations' social and development activities.¹ Switzerland acknowledges the current lack of cooperation between development organizations and charities rooted in

¹ See for example the SDC report on the 'Role and significance of Religion and Spirituality in Development Cooperation', available in four languages at <http://www.sdc.admin.ch/en/Home/Documentation/Publications>

worldviews which tend to appear or be portrayed as conflicting. Since 2005, Switzerland has sought to open new paths for collaboration and dialogue with such organizations. Examples of these efforts are the SEND project, as well as the Montreux Initiative, later transformed into the Islamic Charities Project, also hosted at the CCDP and part of the "Religion and Politics" programme. The relevance of the SEND project is rooted in its humanitarian and development dimensions with regards to Muslim countries, as well as its political dimension illustrated through bringing populations closer by building confidence and mutual respect across the Mediterranean area.

In 2006, the "Religion and Politics" programme approached a large Swiss Faith-Based Organization (FBO), Swiss Interchurch Aid (or *Entraide Protestante; Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz* (HEKS)), with the idea of launching a dialogue project with an Egyptian counterpart. A representative of the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs travelled to Egypt in 2006 and came back with a list of interested organizations in the country. In early 2007, a team comprised of representatives from HEKS, the Swiss Foreign Ministry and the Graduate Institute was sent to Egypt to visit several organizations suggested by the Swiss Foreign Ministry. A confederation of social organizations called Zainab Afify's Organizations (ZAOs) – a name referring to its founder, Mrs. Zainab Afify – was

chosen as project partner due to its strong base in different environments in and around Cairo, its privileged work with youths and women, and its central commitment to faith as an institutional value.

The approach adopted in the project, as in other projects of "Religion and Politics", rests on the historically-rooted observation that debates about religious values or worldviews constructed upon religion tend to divide interlocutors rather than unite their common understanding of the challenges at stake. This is explained by the fact that compromises are often perceived as a capitulation or, in the worst case, a betrayal of one's own value system. In contrast, the methodology used in the project, which is referred to as *Diap Praxis*, suggests that words gain their meaning only through action, and therefore that dialogue involving parties with different worldviews should focus on practical measures.

b. Actors involved

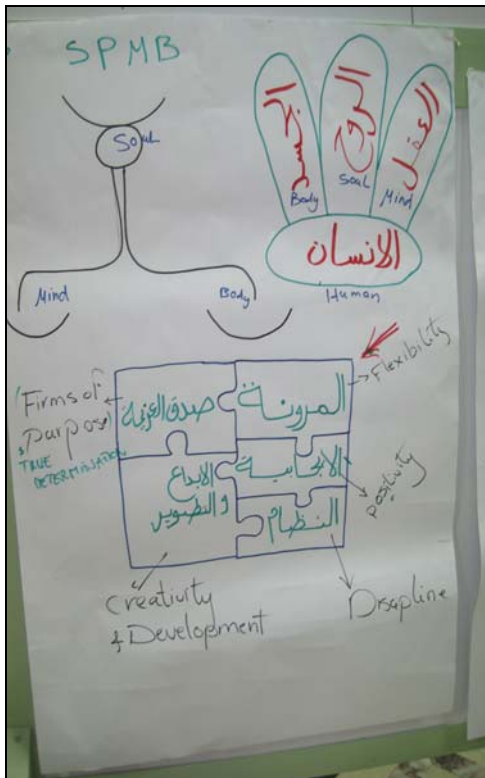
□ *Zainab Afify's Organizations* – ZAOs

Mrs. Zainab Afify is a very active and visionary woman who has helped creating a number of social grassroots organizations in the last twenty years. The principle of faith, which plays a central role in each organization's vision and mission statements, is at the heart of Mrs. Afify's book entitled *Fiqh al-Hayat*, which could be translated as "The moral and religious basis of life".

The book serves to train young women according to a "Spiritual Programming for the Mind and Body" (SPMB). SPMB is a program that enables successful trainees to achieve a balance between their spirit, their mind and their body. The aim of the program is a balanced life under the leadership of the spirit. *Fiqh al-Hayat* guides the activities of the organization and charts the ways in which its volunteers (called "Pearls" after successfully completing the SPMB training) can be active in their organization before playing a bigger role in their daily interaction with society.

The ZAOs cover regions in and around Giza as well as in the Delta zone. They are comprised of four main associations;

- General Social Services Association in Giza (GSSA), the first NGO to be founded by the head of the ZAOs in 1994;
- Kafr Masoud Association for the Service and Development of Society (KMASDS), in the village of Kafr Masoud near the city of Tanta;
- Association of *La'ali' el-Kheir* in the ZAOs' home village in the governorate of Menoufia;
- The National Orphans Federation.



A schema translating the SPMB into English during a roundtable discussion in January 2010. Source: SEND.

Since 2001, Mrs. Zainab Afify has participated in the leadership of these different organizations by training the "Pearls" who in turn participate in the institutional management of the associations. One of the aims of the trainings is to reinforce the individual capacities of the 'Pearls' and the persons around them by developing new human resources using the *Fiqh al-Hayat* booklet. Through the creation and coordination of development projects, they contribute to the burgeoning of a broader popular societal base. The ZAOs' main motivations for joining the SEND project rest on the learning opportunities and knowledge-gaining experience, especially since it is the first international exposure of the "Pearls". Through the SEND project, the ZAOs hope to develop and enhance the field of voluntarism in Egypt by training team members. The dia-

logue dimension of the project is valuable for the ZAOs since it shows a degree of convergence with the working principle of the Christian FBO.

- *Swiss Interchurch Aid (Entraide Protestante; Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz) – HEKS*

HEKS was founded in 1946 by the Swiss Protestant Churches. Its headquarters are located in Zurich, with a branch office in Lausanne. Since 2004, its organizational form follows that of a foundation. HEKS is committed to greater humanity and justice in the world. At the centre of HEKS's commitment to disadvantaged sectors of the population lies the dignity of every human being. Dignity is understood as the foundation of both the universal human rights and the basic Christian value of charity expressed in the true love within the meaning of the Gospel. These twin principles construct the frame of reference on which HEKS operates and upon which it bases its demand that human beings of all cultures and religions be deeply respected. Hence, the work of HEKS is guided by the message of Jesus Christ and pursues the aims of the mission statement, namely *justice, peace, and protection of creation*.

Within Switzerland, HEKS runs five regional offices and 40 projects ranging from social integration of disadvantaged people (employment; daily structures; accommodation and shelter; languages; intercultural mediation and translation; pre-school development) to advocacy for the socially

disadvantaged. Internationally, HEKS runs 290 projects in 45 countries and cooperates solely with local partner organizations, hence not sending Swiss nationals abroad. HEKS's development cooperation activities concentrates on rural communities' security; access to resources such as land or water; production, processing and marketing of agricultural products; income generation; fight for the rights of socially disadvantaged people; and on the resolution of conflict and the promotion of peace.

HEKS joined the SEND project upon a proposal by FDFA-PD IV. The set-up and intentions of the SEND project coincided with an internally already existing concern of HEKS regarding a general re-evaluation of possible cooperation with Muslim FBOs in the Middle East. HEKS's participation in SEND goes in line with its policy to maintain the coherence and link with the grass-roots level and reflects the increasing interest in the role of Islam in general affairs and the role of Muslim FBOs in the field of development. In an internal 2007 document, HEKS stated that "if a certain trend of promoting faith-based models of life and of government is indeed observed in societies, then Western organizations should re-evaluate their strategy and action and question whether and how support of organizations representing such a trend is possible and relevant."² HEKS, like most other Western development or-

² Laufer Florence (2007) *HEKS/EPER in the Middle East. A Christian Faith-based Organization engaged in the Middle East*, Lausanne: HEKS, p.3.

ganizations so far, enjoys predominantly secular cooperation partnerships in the Middle East (there is currently only one Christian FBO partner, while formerly there were up to three or four Christian FBOs). However, based on the above mentioned rationale, HEKS expresses its readiness in general – and within the SEND project in particular – to challenge the biased trend of not working with development organizations with reference to Islam. HEKS wants to challenge what it considers a misconception, namely the misleading proposition that Islam is not compatible with Western/international concepts and goals of development (democracy, gender equality, etc.).



HEKS's pyramid of Participation, Equity and Empowerment presented in January 2010. Source: SEND.

□ *The Graduate Institute's CCDP*

The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding co-directs the "Religion and Politics" programme and coordinates the operational and learning aspects of the SEND project. It is in charge of the organization, financing and reporting of activities, while providing side-reflections to the process rather than being an integral part of the dialogue. After its creation in May 2008, the centre took over the role previously held by the Graduate Institute's Program for the Study of International Organization(s) (PSIO).

□ *FDFA-PD IV*

Since 2003, Switzerland has been engaged in dialogue projects with the objective of exploring the feasibility of cooperation between Western organizations and their counterparts in countries with predominantly Muslim populations – more specifically, in the field of social and developmental action spurred by FBOs. The present project, bringing together an Egyptian and a Western organization with different religious backgrounds, is a case in point. The FDFA-PD IV is interested in broadening its knowledge and experience in the area of peace promotion in contexts where worldviews tend to divide interlocutors. It considers the enhancement of cooperation across different religions and worldviews as an area of expertise it seeks to enhance and promote. The SEND project is one of the pilot projects exploring possibilities of cooperation between state and non-state organizations animated by different value systems.

c. Overview of the activities

A number of meetings have taken place in Switzerland and in Egypt since 2007, at the rate of about two meetings per year followed up with regular contacts via email or phone calls. The meetings held to date are listed below and illustrate the process of a joint experience which became the basis of growing mutual trust and cooperation. The meetings involved the ZAOs and HEKS as active participants, and CCDP and FDFA-PD IV as coordinators. In addition, two project consultants participated in the meetings as observers until October 2008.

Lausanne, spring 2008: During this first meeting, delegations from both organizations met and got to know each other in an informal setting. HEKS introduced the ZAOs to its empowerment activities with migrant women in Geneva. In turn, the ZAOs presented their work and approach. The main issues the presentations focused on were migration and poverty. Two project consultants participated in the meeting as observers and gave a presentation about the evolution of the role of women in different societies. The meeting ended with a leisure trip to a village in the mountains nearby.



A 'Pearl' introduces project participants to the social context of one of the ZAOs' many projects during a field trip to the Nile Delta region in the fall of 2008. Source: SEND.

Cairo, fall 2008: The two delegations gathered in Cairo for the second meeting with the aim of developing the participants' understanding of the activities and branches of both organizations, as well as widening the personal contact among volunteers and employees of both organizations. The ZAOs presented their work in the field, focusing on empowerment projects for youth and poor people in the Nile Delta. The challenges of volunteering in Egypt and Switzerland were discussed, as well as the opportunities and possibilities for undertaking a joint activity. A leisure trip was undertaken on the Red Sea coast. Unfortunately, many ideas were given without reaching an agreement on how to implement them.

Geneva and Zurich, spring 2009: During this meeting, a joint report of the project covering the period from February 2007 to October 2008 was endorsed and amended by both organizations. It highlighted the participants' concerns, comments, and lessons learned in the process between the ZAOs and HEKS. The participants visited one of HEKS's youth empowerment projects in Burgdorf, which focuses on the reinsertion of marginalized and unemployed youths into the social and economic spheres. During the last day in Zurich, negotiations about a joint activity continued and led to one of the process' most critical moments, described in more details below (see *Difficulties encountered*).



After clarifying the organizations' roles within SEND during a meeting in Cairo in winter 2010, participants actively engaged in discussions on the joint activity. Source: SEND.

Cairo, winter 2009/2010: This meeting served to clarify roles and re-establish a positive working relationship after the critical moment in spring 2009, on the basis of which a joint camp for Egyptian and Swiss youth could be organized. This meeting is described in more details below (see *Current dynamics*).

Two upcoming meetings are on the agenda. The next meeting should take place in September 2010 as a way to finalize the preparation of a joint training camp. The next milestone of the SEND *Diap Praxis* process will be the preparation, coordination, and implementation of the training camp consisting of a week of joint activities between 25 and 30 Swiss and Egyptian youths. The camp carries the objective of instigating a self-learning, motivating process to contribute to a just development.

CURRENT DYNAMICS

a. Progress

During the project's first two years, the two organizations visited each other several times and got to know each other on a personal and professional level. Throughout the meetings, they [a] built confidence; [b] overcame obstacles and difficulties; [c] got to know and understand each organization's work in the field; [d] established a relationship of mutual respect; and [e] defined a joint activity that benefits both organizations (i.e. the definition and running of a joint training camp for young women to become

"peace/bridge builders" in their communities).

In the current phase of SEND, the two organizations have continued to meet and have so far [a] clarified the roles of all the actors involved; [b] clarified communication, decision making and work procedures; [c] established ways of relating to each organization's identity; [d] started with the preparation of the joint camp for young women including the drafting of a joint program; [e] started to merge concepts from both organizations' strategy documents, i.e. HEKS's mission statement and the ZAO's *Fiqh al-Hayat*.

b. Difficulties encountered

Like in most dialogue processes involving sensitive issues and differing world visions, various obstacles were encountered in the course of the meetings and dialogues. During the Spring 2009 meeting in Zurich, a discussion between members of the two organizations led to a moment of strong disagreement. While discussing the joint implementation of a camp for young women, the ZAOs representatives stated that their curriculum deals with the issue of human relationship with God. This triggered a response from some members of HEKS who clarified that some colleagues in the organization were secular, although they work hard and espouse the organization's values entirely.

It was the first time that such an issue was raised in the SEND process

and HEKS's position surprised the ZAOs representatives because both organizations had affirmed that they were faith-based organizations from the beginning of the project.

The ZAOs did not accept the fact of having secular employees within a dialogue between two FBOs. They believed that as long as the issue was inside one's heart then it was not questioned, but once it was openly declared to have secular employees this could not be accepted in a dialogue between two FBOs. On the other hand, HEKS was unwilling at this stage to guarantee that all its participants would publicly announce their belief in God, as it considered such an issue an intrusion into the private sphere of its employees. This led to a discussion about the "faith" identity of HEKS, in which HEKS felt that the ZAOs questioned the integrity of its way of relating to faith. This escalation almost led to the end of the project. At this stage, the dynamics were that each organization – by insisting on its own point of view – appeared to invalidate the organizational identity or the point of view of the other.

Nevertheless, after the meeting in Zurich, the organizations decided to continue the dialogue process and try and meet in early 2010 in order to finalize the plans for a joint camp. They encountered new challenges in communication as the role of each actor and that of the convening organization (CCDP) became increasingly unclear. On short notice, HEKS and the ZAOs decided to hold the

meeting in January 2010 in order to clarify roles, communication, and decision making before investing into drafting a concrete action plan for the potential summer camp.

The January 2010 meeting in Cairo turned out to be a great success. Both HEKS and the ZAOs clarified their roles in the project, as well as their ways of communicating. Trust was rebuilt and both organizations committed themselves to continue to work together. Despite a certain degree of internal scepticism of both organizations towards the project, they are dedicated to continue to help each other to overcome obstacles. It was agreed that the faith-based identity of participants, as well as the way each organization relates to faith, will not be put in question. Generally, participants agreed that problems between societies are not due to different religions but rather to the misunderstanding between nations. Both organizations explicitly agreed to welcome the other as s/he is (i.e. in his/her ways of expressing faith) and seek to enhance each other instead of seeking to change the way of thinking of each other. It was also agreed that HEKS and the ZAOs are the owners of decision making in the process. They will take decisions jointly and propose them to CCDP and FDFA-PD IV.

The spirit of the discussions held in Cairo in the first half of the meeting set a good and solid framework on which to build the next steps of the

SEND project. In the second half of the Cairo meeting in January 2010, HEKS and the ZAOs decided to "bake a common cake out of their respective ingredients" (*sic*) and to merge concepts from each organization's strategy documents (HEKS's mission statement and the ZAOs' *Fiqh al-Hayat*) to be used as the basis for the curriculum of the joint summer camp.



Design of the merging sheet from each organization's strategy documents in light of the preparation of the joint summer camp during the winter 2010 meeting. Source: SEND.

More importantly, the NGOs combined two sets of concepts from their respective strategy documents: the *Successful Personality* of the ZAOs and *HEKS's Pyramid of Participation and Empower-*

ment. So far the two organizations have linked concepts together (in bold: the ZAOs' concepts), hinting thus at a substantial overlap in the thematic priorities;

- 1) **True determination**; accountability
- 2) Dignity
- 3) **Flexibility; creativity and development**; awareness of own resources
- 4) **Positivity**; positive power; acknowledgement
- 5) **Discipline**; transparency

c. Current trends

The SEND project is aware that the 'Islamic-Western worlds' opposition is a simplification that easily leads to misconceptions. Therefore the conceptual underpinnings of the project try to avoid enforcing stereotypical divides and aim to go beyond misconceptions by fostering joint efforts on a practical level.

The preparation and implementation of a joint camp with young women from Egypt and Switzerland will bring up new challenges for both organizations. It is hoped that the mutual trust and understanding resulting from the experience of SEND's NGOs will prove to be a solid basis to overcome the challenges in a positive and innovative way.

SEND is an on-going learning process, during which the participants' knowledge grows gradually albeit the fact that major dimensions of reality remain unknown to them. It is important that the project team re-

mains sensitive to the context around the project and its changing realities.

A number of indirect effects of SEND have been observed during the process. In fact, SEND has also served as a platform to exchange frank views about ongoing affairs across the Mediterranean region and other possible socio-economic divides. It has thus allowed participants to exchange concerns regarding various events having occurred during the course of the project, or very sensitive issues such as the Gaza War in early 2009, or even on the decision of a 57% majority of Swiss citizens to ban the construction of minarets countrywide in November 2009.

LESSONS LEARNED

□ **Language matters!** Recurrent difficulties arose when it came to enabling a good comprehension of each other during dialogue rounds. SEND tried different options to ensure a good translation between the involved actors, but only professional interpreters were able to guarantee the condition for a thorough exchange between the two organizations.

□ **Organizations inspired by faith are sensitive when their identity is questioned.** An organization's need to communicate its identity coherently – to the outside as well as to its own members – has to

be respected. It is best if dialoguing organizations develop an awareness of each other's needs and take them into account at all stages of the project. Starting questions to achieve this can be: How are we talking to each other? How are we shaping communication processes? How do we best grasp the identity of the other organization?

□ **We might tend to overstate the importance of the difference of values.** Often problems arise on the relational level and should be addressed by clarifying roles, communication and decision making processes instead of interpreting the other behaviour based on one's own assumption about his/her different values. If differences of values indeed become salient, it is useful to ask oneself how the organizations are relating to them and putting them into play – instead of focusing on the values as such. In fact, values might be the same but carry different names. Therefore, it would be wiser to look deeper into their practical meaning and effect rather than focus on their name.

□ **Policy and strategy documents are a resource for joint action even if they appear different.** Similar concepts and ideas found in each organization's policy and strategy documents can be the starting point for the implementation of a joint activity.

□ **There are sceptics.** There is a certain degree of scepticism towards

the project in both organizations. It is better to address this issue and keep it in mind in order not to create tensions within the organizations – and to avoid ‘losing’ people who might be valuable for the project. Sceptics are usually committed members of an organization. They tend to voice criticism in times of change of project participants or change in the project teams.

□ **Avoiding direct payments makes the project easier to implement.** The SEND project does not involve any payments to the partners, except for the reimbursement of travel, meeting expenses and a compensation for the days of work that HEKS dedicates to the project. This has certainly neutralized some incentives to participate in the project and favoured thorough cooperation.

□ **Acknowledging the fact that one does not understand is important.** SEND is an on-going learning process during which the participants’ knowledge of each other in the wider context of the project grows gradually. Other dimensions, nevertheless, remain unknown to participants. Hence, it is important to remain sensitive to the context of the project and its changing realities and to be ready for continuous learning and reconsideration. In addition, it is crucial to refrain from interpreting statements and actions of the partner organization which are difficult to understand firsthand. A false interpretation can change the

perception of the other and lead to tensions and miscommunication.

□ **Direct communication between partners is crucial.** In order to avoid small misunderstandings from developing into problems and issues of mistrust, it is important that a core group from both organizations stays in regular contact (through email and Skype). In fact, since January 2010, ZAOs and HEKS have been developing a joint ownership of decision making processes, thus refraining CCDP or DP-IV from being perceived as an intruding ‘mediator’ or ‘facilitator’.

About the project brief

The project brief was written by Benoît Challand and Emanuel Schaeublin of the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP). It is updated on a continuous basis by Benoît Challand and Elvire Corboz.

The brief serves to highlight the project’s progress since 2006 and will be followed by other project outputs, both of the Swiss and Egyptian NGO Dialogue (SEND) Project and the other projects falling under the "Religion and Politics: Initiatives and Applied Research" programme.

For more information, visit

http://graduateinstitute.ch/ccdp/religion_politics.html