

CCDP Issue Brief

The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding

The Swiss and Egyptian NGO Dialogue Project (SEND)

Executive Summary

The Swiss and Egyptian NGO Dialogue (SEND) project (2007-2011), an initiative of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Political Affairs Division IV (FDFA-PD IV), brought together an Egyptian Muslim and a Swiss Christian NGO in a practice-oriented dialogue in order to explore the bridge-building potential of intercommunal cooperation among and between societies. As the project comes to an end, this issue brief explores the principal objectives and results of the SEND project through a review of the activities and outcomes reached during the four-year process. It also highlights the challenges faced by both NGOs and the ways found to overcome them. The lessons one can draw from an experience such as the SEND project are diverse, ranging from operational and project management recommendations to larger considerations about the meaning and interpretation of motivation, values, and religion in intercommunal cooperation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is increasing recognition of the central role played by faith-based organizations (FBOs) in the field of humanitarian and development aid. FBOs maintain sustained relationships with the population they engage with in order to meet their goals. They conduct programmes and activities and often provide services and humanitarian assistance to parts of the population that governmental institutions do not reach.

Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and charities are an integral part of civil society worldwide. They have established a religiously inspired system of aid, which operates in parallel to – rather than in direct coordination with – the international aid and relief system. In many circumstances, they are able to provide more efficient relief services than secular NGOs in Muslim-majority contexts, mainly due to the cultural proximity between relief works and beneficiaries.

However, cooperation between Western civil society associations (be they secular or faith-based) and Islamic NGOs in Muslim-majority countries remains, to date, very scarce. This reality is mainly explained by the existence of both actual and perceived differences of values and religious conceptions of the world, in addition to diverse institutional and communication cultures.

The issue of cooperation with Islamic organizations is relevant both politically (it fosters confidence-building across the Mediterranean and beyond) and in relation to the future of humanitarian and development cooperation in Muslim-majority countries (it promotes transparency and good governance in civil society). At a time when North Africa and the Middle East are undergoing tremendous upheavals and changes, intercommunal cooperation can contribute to the construction of pluralist and inclusive societies and to the peaceful coexistence of groups with different worldviews at the national and international levels.

A number of initiatives have tackled and reflected on the issue of intercommunal cooperation in order to shed light on its potential. Most of them tend to focus on Islam in particular, such as for example the conference “Development Cooperation in the Context of Islam” held in Bonn in December 2009, which discussed the importance of overcoming misunderstandings and building trust between Islamic organizations of cooperation and Western organizations.¹ Other initiatives tend to develop the potential of cooperation between FBOs and secular organizations.² Yet not only is the improvement of the understanding and cooperative relations across cultures and religions at the centre of current discussions, but the importance of countering the forces that fuel polarization and extremism is also considered, as demonstrated, for example, by the work of the Alliance of Civilizations.³

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¹http://www.welthungerhilfe.de/fileadmin/media/pdf/Themen/Bericht_Islamkonferenz.pdf

²[http://graduateinstitute.ch/webdav/site/ccdp/shared/5072/Religion,politics,conflict,humanitarianim_workshop%20proceedings.pdf](http://graduateinstitute.ch/webdav/site/ccdp/shared/5072/Religion,politics,conflict,humanitarianism_workshop%20proceedings.pdf)

³<http://www.unaoc.org/about/>

(FDFA-PD IV), brought together an Egyptian Muslim and a Swiss Christian NGO in a practice-oriented dialogue in order to explore the bridge-building potential of intercommunal cooperation among and between societies. Its conceptual underpinnings tried to avoid enforcing stereotypical divides and go beyond misconceptions, an approach based on the hypothesis that organizations with different religious references can find common modalities of action-based cooperation, although they might depart in the cognitive framing of such intervention. Reaching an understanding of mutual cultural concerns was not a priority, but the project instead focused on testing the ground to define practical rules that ensure the safe implementation of a joint activity to the satisfaction of all parties involved.

The SEND project was a rich learning experience that contributed valid know-how and hands-on analysis about how intercommunal cooperation is possible in practice. The process that led the two participating organizations to know each other, build trust, discuss their values, and use them to find connectors on which to implement a joint practical project constituted a useful framework on which future initiatives of intercommunal work between FBOs (whether undertaken with a sponsoring government or not) can be built. Equally, the review of the main challenges met during the SEND process aims at informing interested stakeholders. The lessons one can draw from an experience such as the SEND project are diverse, ranging from operational and project management recommendations to larger considerations about the meaning and interpretation of motivation, values, and religion in intercommunal cooperation.

II. PRESENTATION OF THE SEND PROJECT

The SEND project brought together a Swiss and an Egyptian faith-based NGO – one with Christian and one with Muslim references. Universal human rights and the Christian value of charity are the twin principles of the former's frame of reference through which it strives to ensure that the dignity of human beings of all cultures and religions is respected. The Swiss organization saw its participation in the SEND project as an opportunity to challenge misconceptions about Islam's incompatibility with Western/international concepts and goals of development (democracy, gender equality, etc.).

The Egyptian Muslim NGO chosen as project partner is a confederation of grassroots social organizations operating in and around Cairo mainly for the youth and women. Commitment to faith is central to its mission and vision, guiding the ways in which its volunteers are trained to be active in the organization before playing a bigger role in their daily interaction with society. Its main motivations for joining the SEND project rested on the learning potential of the initiative and on expectations to develop the field of voluntarism in Egypt by training team members.

FDFA-PD IV initiated this project as a contribution to its efforts in promoting peaceful coexistence by seeking and testing innovative approaches to facilitate cooperation between FBOs from different parts of the world and from different religious traditions. The Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development

and Peacebuilding (CCDP) (and initially the Program for the Study of International Organizations (PSIO)) in Geneva coordinated the logistics and financing of the project; it also provided side reflections but did not take part in the dialogue.

The fact that the Swiss-sponsored initiative did not make payments to the partner organizations (except for the reimbursement of travel, meeting expenses, and a compensation for the days of work that the Swiss delegation dedicated to the project) had the positive effect of neutralizing some incentives for participation and favored thorough cooperation between the FBOs. Collaboration between NGOs in international development cooperation, however, generally entails financial flows and is characterized by a donor-beneficiary relationship with the power dimension that goes with it.

The Swiss and the Egyptian FBO members met face-to-face on five occasions in Switzerland and in Egypt, before they organized a joint camp which carried the objective of investigating a self-learning, motivating process to contribute to a just development. During the first meetings, the members got to know each other in informal settings and develop a mutual understanding of their respective core activities, before preliminary discussions about a joint activity could start.

At mid-course into the project, significant hurdles challenged the SEND project, up to near collapse. Tension arose when the issue of the organizations' 'faith' identity and relationship with God was raised in a meeting. Each FBO – by insisting on its own point of view – appeared to invalidate the institutional identity of the other. Nevertheless, the dialogue continued and a Code of Conduct was drafted, in which the organizations committed to acknowledge the different modes of expression of their religious motivations instead of challenging them. Shortly afterwards, high tension loomed over the project due to a lack of clear modes of communication and decision-making.

With trust regained by informal face-to-face discussions between key figures of the project, the FBOs engaged in a search for connectors by presenting the core values of their work and focusing on those with the highest connecting potential. The organizations came to the conclusion that they share some common values – though sometimes those take different names. These shared values became the cornerstone of the practical activity jointly organized by the two NGOs, namely a training camp for young women to become 'peace/bridge builders' in their communities.

At the end of the process, the organizations reflected on the whole experience to identify the lessons they drew about intercommunal cooperation. The Swiss FBO learned that it could look for shared values as a basis of collaboration with partner organizations should the traditional human rights framework prove to be inefficient in a given context. The Egyptian FBO realized that common values are the best ground to achieve coexistence. It intends to test the approach again by participating in intercommunal cooperation projects in the Egyptian local context.

III. MAIN CHALLENGES

The Swiss and Egyptian participants were respectively described in the project as organizations with Christian and Muslim references. Differences about the values and religious motivation behind their social work and development program existed – as best exemplified by the challenging crisis about their respective ‘faith’ identity.

Yet interpreting the challenges of a dialogue project with a ‘value’ lens may well divert the attention from a number of difficulties arising on the relational and structural levels. Challenges have more to do with organizational problems and some inherent asymmetries between the participating FBOs than with divergence on the interpretative level. Moreover, the difficulties encountered – as well as the ways found to overcome most of them – all fed into the project’s learning process, providing possibilities for improvement in subsequent stages.

Differences in the FBOs’ institutional cultures

The institutional culture of the two NGOs involved in the SEND project contained more differences than initially anticipated. This became manifest at the level of their internal organization, decision-making structure, and prior international exposure. Though not necessarily a challenge for the success of intercommunal cooperation, such differences should nevertheless be identified early on in the process.

The Swiss partner was a professional-based organization, unlike the Egyptian NGO, which was headed by its founder – a woman philanthropist and spiritual figure – and staffed by a group of part-time female volunteers without professional expertise in the field of development and conflict resolution. The structural asymmetry was also apparent in the composition of the core groups representing the organizations in the project (on the Swiss side, a sector manager and two program officers; on the other side, the NGO founder/ head along with a fluctuating number of volunteers willing to learn how to deal with the outside world).

Moreover, the professionalized ‘Western-style’ institutional culture of the Swiss NGO was not matched in the Egyptian organization, where participation and representation owed much to a personalized leadership style and an informal, consultative decision-making structure. The institutional asymmetries between the two participating organizations, which several changes in the composition of the core groups only exacerbated, carried negative operational and communication consequences until those were acknowledged and explicitly addressed.

In terms of their work, the Egyptian and Swiss NGOs differed in their level of international exposure. The former ran its activities locally, and had no international experience whatsoever. Involved in projects in more than 40 countries, the Swiss counterpart was used to cooperate with local partner organizations in its areas of operation, though never in Egypt and without assuming its traditional role of donor in exchange for a service or a mandate. In this sense, the novelty of the project’s regional and operational scope for the Swiss NGO compensated for the Egyptian organization’s lack of prior international work.

Unclear definition of roles

The SEND project, an initiative instigated by the Swiss Government and coordinated by an academic centre, brought together two FBOs in a cross-communal cooperation dialogue. Two years into the project, a period of deep tension put the finger on an important structural weakness regarding the actual – as well as perceived – roles of the parties involved in the project along with the participating NGOs.

At certain stages of the project, the Swiss FDFA-PD IV was perceived as too much of a driving force; the project coordinator occasionally assumed a leading instead of an observer role; and the mandates of the external consultants hired at different stages of the project were not clearly defined and explained to all parties. The two NGOs, for their part, had not yet assumed a committed ownership of the project nor reached a high level of mutual trust. This was manifest in their mode of communication, not directly with each other, but through the officers in charge of the project at FDFA-PD IV. The absence of sufficiently well defined roles, moreover, made it difficult for the Egyptian organization to distinguish between its Swiss counterpart and the other Swiss voices, a situation that created an imbalance between the Egyptian and the Swiss NGOs.

The debates that took place in these challenging times were eventually highly beneficial to the SEND process. In practice, it was agreed that the NGOs would take full ownership of internal communication and appoint two representatives each to manage the correspondence. The clarification of the modes of communication also instigated a positive refining of the roles, modes of operation, and decision-making inside the dialogue.

Language barrier and miscommunication

The quality of communication in a dialogue project is unarguably the most central key to success. On many occasions during the SEND project, the linguistic barrier was described by all actors as a serious issue. Different options were tried to ensure a good translation between the actors involved, but only professional interpretation – with the high costs it entailed – proved to be the best solution to guarantee the condition for a thorough exchange between the two organizations during face-to-face meetings; written correspondence was undertaken in English.

Beyond the issue of language, the project witnessed misunderstandings in communication. Those were barely the result of differences in worldview or values. Rather, misunderstandings were due to classical difficulties in communication by human beings, exacerbated by the reality from living in a different context and by the indirect way of communicating, at least until the matter was addressed.

Limited operational convergence

One aim of the SEND project was to test whether FBOs from different cultural and religious backgrounds can find convergence in a life-real situation joint project, despite some differences in the cognitive framing in which they respectively operate. An obstacle that the project did underestimate in its initial phase was the difficulty to identify a relevant joint activity based on shared interests. A classical development project was not possible mainly because the organizations had quite different core activities, but also for corporate reasons (the Swiss NGO did not have Egypt as one of its country programs, and the Egyptian NGO's type of registration did not allow it to cooperate with foreign organizations). The search for a practical cooperation activity was, moreover, neither context- nor needs-driven.

Eventually, the organization of a camp for the training of young women was agreed upon. Because the activity was not in the Swiss organization's general line of work and did not involve its usual target group (unlike in the case of the Egyptian counterpart), the Swiss core group tried to compensate this imbalance – with success – by identifying a like-minded association involved in youth training and activities and have it participate in the camp and recruit the Swiss trainees.

While both NGOs assessed the joint organization of the common practical activity as a key aspect of the project, the camp bore different degrees of significance for each of them, most probably because of the limited degree of convergence towards the chosen type of activity. For the Swiss NGO, the interest lay more in the process leading to the organization of the camp (namely, the identification of shared values and the mutual understanding of each other's work) than in the camp itself. In contrast, the Egyptian organization saw the camp as the main result of the project, and it has integrated the shared values identified for the camp in its training activities.

Internal resistance

The SEND project was a long process, with an unsure outcome and intangible, let alone rapid, results. As a result, internal resistance was felt by both organizations. The Swiss NGO, usually acting as a donor organization, felt pressured into delivering results. In addition to the suspicion that local authorities held about the Egyptian NGO's involvement in the SEND project, there were also a few internal skeptics, who feared the consequences of their involvement in a 'Western' project.

Discussions about the resistance and pressure both FBOs faced from within proved beneficial in at least two ways. It forced them to clarify their motivation and expectations and helped the core groups involved in the SEND project to identify matters of concern that had to be dealt with carefully.

IV. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***The choice of the partnering FBOs should not be taken lightly.*** While asymmetries in the institutional culture of the partner organizations are likely to exist, they should be taken into consideration from the outset. Regardless of these differences, some prerequisites for the staff, members, and constituencies involved in intercommunal cooperation have to be fulfilled. These include a genuine interest in opening themselves to new experiences; an awareness of their identity in a way that they are able to enter into a dialogue without denying their roots nor imposing them to the counterpart FBO; a conviction that human beings of different religious and cultural backgrounds can share similar values; and a strong willingness to learn from experience.
- At the same time, ***personalities matter the most.*** Dialogue and cooperation are first and foremost an exchange between people that can be most easily sustained at the individual rather than institutional level. The participants in a dialogue are the vectors of trust-building in and between organizations.
- ***Confidence-building takes time and energy.*** Mutual knowledge, on which confidence can be built, requires time and sufficient sustained and regular contact. Trust should, however, never be taken for granted. It is better to avoid involving new actors during the process, because the difficulties and misunderstanding that were previously overcome may come up again.
- ***The modalities and practical arrangements should be defined at the outset of the dialogue process and revaluated throughout.*** In order to avoid small misunderstandings from developing into problems and issues of mistrust, the roles, decision-making, and modes of communication need to be well defined. A reference frame including a Code of Conduct may prove useful to establish the red lines that the organizations agree not to cross.
- ***Dialogue should be linked to activities.*** Exchanges should focus on practical issues, while keeping in mind differences of views. In practice, the higher the operational convergence between the partnering organizations, the more likely it is that action-based cooperation will work.
- ***The importance of the difference of values should not be overstated.*** Problems often arise on the relational level and should be addressed by clarifying roles, communication, and decision-making processes instead of interpreting the other's behavior based on one's assumption about his/her different values. More useful than to focus on the values as such, it is therefore wiser to look deeper into their practical meaning for the FBOs that relate to them and put them into play.
- ***Addressing misunderstandings is key.*** Participating organizations are advised to openly and repeatedly discuss their expectations, frustrations, as well as positive views about the project. In particular, one should not shy away from acknowledging the existence of difficulties since those are likely

to feed into the learning process. Crisis is about finding a solution and is hence beneficial to the process.

- Nevertheless, *acknowledging the fact that complete understanding cannot be achieved is important*. Mutual knowledge grows gradually. Hence, it is crucial to refrain from interpreting the statements and actions of the partner organization that are difficult to understand firsthand, to remain sensitive to changing realities, and to be ready for continuous learning, assessment, and reconsideration.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The “clash of civilizations” and worldviews is a paradigm that is still very much alive, and one through which people tend to see today’s world and relations between and within societies. By engaging civil society actors of different religious references in practical cooperation and helping them overcome respective stereotypes, the SEND project helped dispel some of the myths of the “clash of civilizations”. The lessons the project provided have relevance for intercommunal initiatives not only across the Mediterranean Sea, but also among societies in local contexts. The recent ground-breaking political developments in several Muslim-majority countries (the so-called ‘Arab Spring’) on the one hand, and the ongoing debates in the West about Islam and the integration of Muslim communities on the other, both provide unique opportunities to establish channels of cooperation and to foster confidence-building for the inclusion of all segments of local societies.

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