



## REPORT FROM PALESTINE

### Capacity Building for Palestinian Civil Society July 2006

A strong, independent civil society is essential to the development of healthy democracies, and this is especially true in Palestine where the challenges to fledgling democratic institutions are immense. The Ma'an Development Centre, established in 1989, has been a leading secular, Palestinian development NGO that focuses on food security through the development of sustainable agricultural practices, the participation and empowerment of women and youth, and capacity building for community-based organizations and NGOs.

In July 2005, Ma'an invited the Karuna Center to lead training seminars for them and their partners in conflict management and change management. This year we were invited to lead a "training of trainers" seminar on social change and youth leadership for Ma'an and its NGO partners, as well as a two-day staff development and teambuilding retreat for Ma'an staff. Our participants were especially interested in the challenge of developing more collaborative styles of leadership within Palestinian society and utilizing more horizontal forms of power, recognizing that both in traditional Palestinian family



structures and under past political leadership decision making has tended to be very top-down. They also saw the constructive engagement of youth as absolutely critical to a peaceful future. As part of the training of trainers component, participants worked in teams to design their own social change and leadership trainings and then practiced delivering sections of them. They found the training very practical and were full of ideas for how to incorporate what they learned in their work in the field, both in

rural communities and refugee camps with youth groups, women's groups, and others. Participants demonstrated how they would teach youth leaders to listen to vastly differing viewpoints or how they would work with women to find the courage to become active, visible leaders in their communities.

Our time in Ramallah coincided with the events that sparked the recent escalation of violence in the Middle East, the kidnapping of the Israeli soldier followed by the bombing and disabling of Gaza's only power plant, the incursion of Israeli tanks, and the

arrest of Hamas parliamentarians and officials in government ministries. Our participants were naturally concerned with this growing escalation, as well as the overall economic hardship that has developed since Hamas won the elections and funds for the Palestinian Authority, along with US and European development aid, have been greatly curtailed. Businesses are suffering, and we are told that many Palestinians are going into debt to buy food for their families. We were deeply impressed that despite these conditions our participants were not at all consumed by frustration or bitterness. Instead, they seemed very focused on what they can do to build a more vibrant, proactive and transparent civil society in Palestine, knowing how important that is to creating the conditions in which peace and democracy can succeed.

With their borders virtually closed and few opportunities for travel, we found our participants hungry for education, training and opportunities to build their skills. Ma'an is eager to pursue an ongoing partnership with Karuna Center and has requested that these July trainings become an annual event. We are eager to comply, as we find Ma'an to be an especially capable and reliable partner with excellent reach into the forefront of the Palestinian civil society movement.

In Israel we had a day of exploratory meetings on joint programs between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs, who comprise 20% of Israeli citizens. As tensions have increased between Israel and Palestine, the gulf has also deepened between the Jewish and Arab population of Israel. Our Jewish and Arab partners are interested not only in dialogue for mutual understanding, but in developing a cross-cutting civic identity as joint citizens of Israel and collaborating on programs to advocate for equal rights and access. Deepening cooperation between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel could provide an important foundation for eventual work between civil society groups in Israel and its neighboring countries. We remain deeply committed to helping all people in this volatile and critically important region find a path to peaceful co-existence.

For more information about this and other Karuna Center programs, please contact:

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