

Grassroots Activism and NGOs

Monday 12 October 2009, by [WARSCHAWSKI Michael](#) (Date first published: 20 August 2009).

We are sitting in the “Information Tent” erected by the Silwan residents who are resisting the growing and aggressive presence of Israeli settlers in their village-neighborhood in East Jerusalem. We are Palestinians, internationals and a substantial number of Israeli activists, who seem to be at home in this context. Not the usual Israeli colonial way of feeling at home everywhere, but out of strong political and personal ties with the local Palestinian activists. These Israelis have gained the right to feel at home: for several years, they are struggling shoulder to shoulder with the Palestinian local residents, as they have been doing in the South Hebron area also. They are, primarily, “Ezra’s children.” About Ezra, I wrote several weeks ago under the title “Ezra—a Mensch,” using the Yiddish word that summarizes the profound humanity of a person. [\[1\]](#)

These activists organize protest activities, demonstrations and are helping organizing a summer camp for the local children, providing courses, developing artistic skills—all under the supervision of the local Palestinian activists, who always have the last word, as it should be in a colonial context. Fabienne, Dany, Ra’anan, Liat, Ezra and a couple dozen others are making true grass-roots activism and demonstrating exemplary solidarity work. Yet outside Silwan and a narrow circle of Israeli and international activists, who has heard of their existence? They have never been invited to seminars on “new means of activism” in Tel Aviv University or in international conferences debating the “role of civil society in peace building”, they have never been nominated as candidates for the Nobel Prize or any other international award, and they do not care. The Ford Foundation or Scandinavian Peace Fund will never approach them with a grant, and they will manage without money, except for the few hundred shekels they will put from their own pocket.

These international conferences, academic seminars, world media and funding agencies have another kind of partner: the non-governmental organizations, NGOs. The NGO world is, somehow, the exact opposite of the Silwan experience, though it has not always been the case. In the 1980s, NGOs were new, independent and grassroots structures aimed at providing services for the people in a political context in which the state did not exist (occupation, war situations) or was totally disconnected from the needs of the population. Gradually, states and international agencies understood the profit they could make out of these non-governmental structures that took upon themselves the fulfillment of their own tasks, at a relatively cheap cost. A few million dollars were petty cash for the states in exchange for health, education and various social services that these states were not able or willing to provide. These states were even ready to swallow the political criticism and campaigns that some of these NGOs were involved in, hoping that through their financing they would be able to control the scope of these criticisms, and channel them into “constructive projects”.

Having been myself the director of an NGO for almost two decades, I can testify how difficult it is to keep a radical political agenda in the framework of the NGO system. The main problem is not direct pressures or demands coming from the donors, but the inner logic of the NGO-system: to formulate long-term “projects” is often contradictory to short-term political duties dictated by local realities; to sustain an administration and project management is often contradictory to immediate activism; to be accountable to donors is different than being accountable to a political constituency.

If an NGO with a radical political agenda wants to keep its progressive character, it needs powerful

and institutionalized safeguards: a strong Board of directors made of political leaders and activists and not of “personalities” from the NGO milieu; that Board must be active in phrasing the mission and the work plan of the NGO, taking the political needs as the only criterion to fix priorities and not the inner-logic of the projects; a system of accountability to the social movement that should be considered **above** the accountability to the donors; to have a staff composed essentially from activists in the movement and not “professionals.” Strong social consciousness and political involvement is indispensable to resist pressures from the donors, as we experienced in the Madrid Social Forum crisis, in 2007, and to be ready to renounce big funding in order to maintain one’s political integrity. As one will remember, other NGOs have failed to resist pressures and were ready to bend to the diktats of the donors. That ability to resist pressures was the result of our accountability to the (Palestinian) social movement and to the active role of a political Board of Directors, or in other words, the fact that the AIC is part and parcel of the social movement and much less of the NGO community. It is also connected to our specific history—the closure of the AIC by the Israeli authorities in 1987, our trial and the fact that most of our staff, Israeli as well as Palestinian, have known jail, something unique in the Israeli NGO community, and more and more rare in the Palestinian NGO community.

Nevertheless, and with all these safeguards, an NGO remains an NGO, and cannot replace and should not replace activism and the activist’s movement. The fact that (progressive) NGOs have funding and can provide an—unusually modest, if we speak about the AIC—salary to its activists, should oblige them to put themselves at the disposal of the activists and to serve the movement: to orient their research and publication policy to the needs of the movement and its campaigns, to publicize their activities and visions, to accept to be for them a resource tool, not a goal for itself.

In order to guarantee that the AIC will continue to meet its political mission and *raison d’être*, our next step shall be to ask the Silwan activist group to accept that one or two of them will join our Board of Directors. I know that this type of activity is not their cup of tea and that being a “Board member of an NGO” is not their style. But I believe that the political nature of the AIC, as well as our historical record, allows us to ask this as a favor.

P.S.

* From Michael Warschawski’s blog:

<http://www.alternativenews.org/michael-warschawski/2101-grassroots-activism-and-ngos.html>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.alternativenews.org/michael-warschawski/2100-a-great-man-israeli-activist-ezra-nawi-must-remain-free.html>