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USAID Success Stories:

### **From helplessness to social change: initiating change after the war in Gaza**

This team of activists comprises twelve Arab social workers, guided and supervised by a graduate of the USAID-funded Change Advocates course for Israeli & Palestinian mental health professionals at the School for Peace Mr. Harb Amara, *Director of the Master Plan for Children at Risk and the Prevention of Family Violence, City of Nazareth*

In their professional lives, they deal with issues of violence in the family; with marriage and family counseling; therapy with parents and children; parental custody issues; and work at the community level on issues of family violence and children at risk. Harb Amara explains:

"The idea was that we have a need, as providers of treatment services to the Arab community, to begin thinking on a larger scale. We must look beyond our role in the therapy or counseling room, beyond the framework of change at the individual level when we are helping people to find solutions to their particular problems. We can and should be developing our thinking about change at the level of the neighborhood, the community, the society. How can we help build a social support system that will assist those same people to work alongside us for social change that will benefit our society as a whole?"

#### **Background**

"During and after the recent war in Gaza, the team felt powerless – unable even to process the events that were happening around us. Those feelings had an impact on our work. Helping others became problematic when, at a certain point, we found ourselves feeling that life was becoming meaningless and that the future was a kind of void – especially our own professional future. My colleagues expressed themselves with phrases like:

- We are so happy that we are still alive.
- We are so powerless and it is all so meaningless.
- What is this insanity all around us?
- This war has been a terrible blow to us.
- The war was like an earthquake.

"Then came the questions:

- Can we really change anything?

- Aren't we really impotent, given the overall situation?
- Will we be able to find a solution and somehow 'save the world'?

"After these generalized wishes, we began focusing more on issues that we really can do something about and how we should proceed and what our role should be:

- To what degree are we responsible to act, as people who work for our community and our society?
- Where should we be looking to make change – in ourselves, in our families, in our organizations, our neighborhoods, our communities, in society, in politics?
- What could we accomplish in our immediate vicinity in a time frame of five to ten years?
- How could we begin drying out some part of the ocean of violence all around us, and using what tools?
- With whom can we connect so as to work together and be more effective on a system level, and exchange support and reinforcement?

"A structured dialogue began to take place around the questions we had been asking at our team meetings. We began creating a dynamic of action at the community level, focusing on issues raised by the underlying assumptions we had articulated at the outset.

- We as treatment providers must bridge the gap between our professional principles and the cultural and social aspects or components of society.
- We as treatment providers must be deeply in synch with our environment and we must believe in ourselves: I am speaking my language here; I am part of my society; I have something to contribute toward changing that society.

"Our fears about the future may or may not be justified, but in the meantime, what is our responsibility vis-à-vis the future? What is our role in building the future of our society? Is our self-confidence and resilience conditional on the resilience of our society? How can we contribute to the collective resilience at the level of the community and hence the society?

"We began seeing a parallel process at the personal level, and the family level, because it was so important to provide social support for people.

"We want to continue to identify potential ways of leading social progress. We know we cannot hold back what happens around us. What we can do is continue

seeking solutions and finding partners, seeking what is common to all, joining with other actors who want people to be happier in their lives.

"Our reality is full of dynamics that attempt to erase the "other" and make everything monochromatic, controlling people who are different, forgetting that we are all human beings. But we can still live together. It's a process that parallels the dynamic of violence we witness sometimes in the treatment room. In violent families with serious problems, one can see the conflict-laden reality, with power games. We try to give both spouses a broader view – they don't have that kind of perspective initially. This helps us go on doing our work, even when there is little cooperation. We will work for change on our own little piece of ground.

"We've found that to make change and keep going, we have to build a supportive environment in which the work for change can go forward. We call this a social support network, one that fits with what we do and how we do it. When I demand change of myself, I need a support network, and that's true beyond that level, too. To be influential, we have to use a social activism approach.

"To mention a few projects we have run successfully thus far on the community level:

- Creating a program to partner with influential religious figures in the city, to build a common language with religious folks so as to work together on preventing family violence, provide support, and identify children at risk.
- Building a women's forum to work for a healthy society, starting with women empowering themselves and moving on to initiating women's community projects.
- Building community resilience for the society; training community people how to cope effectively with emergencies and crises – personal and collective.
- Creating a professional database of all the treatment providers and what they can contribute at the community level."

*This account was provided by Mr. Harb Amara, Director of the Master Plan for Children at Risk and the Prevention of Family Violence, City of Nazareth.*