Neighbors and Enemies: Lessons to Be Learned from the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Regarding Cooperation in Public Health

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We aim to demonstrate on the example of recent Palestinian-Israeli collaborative projects how sustainable cooperation can be achieved despite unfavorable political atmosphere and continuing violent disputes. Palestinian and Israeli participants of the collaborative projects declared that their attitude and belief in coexistence was positively changed as a result of their experience in cooperative work. Their main motivations were a desire to contribute to the resolution of the conflict and to improve professional skills. The experience in Israeli-Palestinian conflict showed that the collaborative projects of higher chance of success and sustainability should address issues of high priority to the concerned parties, lead to demonstrable benefits in the immediate future, and preferably be organized by nongovernmental organizations. Also, to secure long-term success of collaborative projects, parity and symmetry should be maintained, as well as equal division of work and responsibility between the partners. Collaboration in public health field is first to be (re)established in conflict areas to alleviate suffering, minimize future health risks, and prevent further health deterioration. Thereby, public health can serve as a bridge to peace in areas of unrest or war.

Key words: cooperative behavior; international cooperations; Israel; Palestine; public health

Violent regional conflicts have broad deleterious effects on the health, economic system, and whole society, usually on all parties involved. As a rule, the immediate and most extensively affected groups are the vulnerable civilian segments of the populations. The long term effects of such conflicts are uniformly characterized by heavy loss of lives (mostly civilians), displacement of large groups of people, and poverty and deterioration of most of the essential societal systems, such as housing, education, employment, health, and food and water supply. Moreover, the destruction of basic family and community coherent structures and functions has further sequela in many other facets of life.

Just as there are fundamental common (epidemiological) characteristics of violent conflicts, there are also several basic characteristics and conditions that can facilitate successful cooperation between hostile parties, reduce tension, and promote stability or non-violent coexistence. The purpose of this report is to demonstrate on the example of recent Palestinian-Israeli collaborative projects how sustainable cooperation can be achieved despite unfavorable political atmosphere and continuing bitter (violent) disputes.

Role of Public Health in Conflict Areas

Public health aims at achieving physical, behavioral, emotional, spiritual, and social well-being for all members of the community. Health, and particularly public health services, constitute fundamental human rights recognized by all nations. As a rule, large groups of people are affected by the aftermath of hostile conflicts, and vital societal services and institutions are compromised. Thus, public health services are among the first activities that humanitarian, international or local agencies try to reestablish in conflict areas to alleviate suffering, minimize future health risks, and prevent further health deterioration.

Much of the findings presented here are based on an extensive study by Barnea et al (5), which evaluated 148 Palestinian-Israeli collaborative projects during 1994-98, involving about 4,000 professionals on both sides. To a lesser extent we used other sources, such as
observations made by S. Ibrahim (6) and recent evaluations made by Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI). It was already stated that health care workers, because of their professional and humanitarian values, can communicate and collaborate during hostile times better than other groups involved in the conflict. Collaborative projects in health care continue and are maintained during these hard times, despite mistrust and tension between the concerned parties. Keeping and developing such professional-to-professional contacts may serve as a proof that long-term collaboration is feasible and that sustainable projects become bridges for promoting understanding and reducing hostility. Health professionals have a unique role in building trust between foes and creating an atmosphere that facilitates expansion of collaborative projects into other areas, involving broader segments of both communities.

Factors Facilitating Sustainable Cooperation

**Defined High Priority Issues**

Projects should address issues recognized as being of high priority to the concerned parties. Projects leading to demonstrable benefits in the immediate future are of higher chance of success and sustainability. Barnea’s study (5) showed that 97% of the Israeli and 82% of the Palestinian participants were satisfied with their enrollment in collaborative projects and expressed interest in continuing such activities in the future. Main motivations for participation in these projects were a desire to contribute to resolution of the conflict, as stated by 53% of the Israeli and 44% of the Palestinian participants, and a desire to improve professional skills, as stated by 53% of the Palestinians and 18% of the Israelis.

About 2/3 of the Palestinian and 1/3 of the Israeli participants declared that their attitude and belief in coexistence was positively changed as a result of their experience in cooperative work (5). Moreover, working together was evaluated by many as a unique experience in learning about each other and replacing mistrust and stereotyping of the other side.

Several large-scale documents have been prepared to identify and present Palestinians’ priority needs (3,7,8). For example, The National Health Plan for the Palestinians (7) is a detailed document composed by a multidisciplinary committee of the Palestinian National Authority, in which priority issues are listed and analyzed from the Palestinian perspective. Thus, in proposing collaborative projects, compliance with such determined priorities will provide higher chances for success and better acceptance by the concerned population. Similarly, the document of Policies and Strategies for Future Israeli-Palestinian Cooperation in Public Health (4) is an extensive effort by a bilateral group of health scientists to “map” priority needs of the Palestinian population. Thus, future initiatives for cooperation by new groups or agencies should take advantage of existing evaluations and recommendations rather than spend energy and resources verifying priorities on their own. Moreover, there are available channels and sources of information that can facilitate the initial steps necessary for setting a new project, such as recruiting interested participants or identifying appropriate organizations. By taking into consideration all these factors one may greatly improve the chances to end with a viable, sustainable project. Past experience has shown that small-scale, quite similar projects are often initiated independently and conducted in parallel. This is an unfortunate situation, as many of these good will initiatives do not last long, whereas by combining parallel efforts and developing one major effort the chances of success increase significantly. This approach was shown to be also more economic and financially justified. Because financial resources are scarce and the economic needs of the population immense, it is important to guarantee that expenditures are properly spent and managed. Financial transparency and mutual responsibilities in running the project are viewed as major factors affecting the fate of a project. These issues were ranked as number 2 by Palestinians and number 7 by Israelis regarding important factors assisting cooperative projects.

Involvement of Nongovernmental Organizations

Projects organized by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have a better chance of success than direct governmental involvement. In Barnea’s study (5), some 67 different organizations were involved in cooperative projects. Most were from the NGO sector (61%), academic and research institutions (18%), government agencies (17%), and private (non-profit) sector (4%). Most NGOs were service-oriented and could apply their specific expertise quite rapidly in compliance with urgent needs. NGOs were better accepted by the Palestinian population, especially when multinational rather than bilateral activities were concerned. International involvement facilitated acceptance of the projects by the Palestinian population, especially by the less peace-seeking segments of the involved communities. In the case of the NGOs projects, many were oriented toward service where the outcome benefits were quite clear (maternal and child clinics, emergency services, etc). Collaborations among universities were primarily in training of professionals (46%), research (23%), and capacity building. Over 50% of the Palestinian participants reported that their main motivation to cooperate was to improve their professional skills. Similarly, 83% of the Palestinians reported that the projects helped their organization in technical terms or professional expertise. Palestinian participants ranked concrete benefits to target population as number 1 factor assisting success (Israelis ranked it as number 6). Working through nongovernmental agencies allows participants to work together while avoiding political issues related to the current disputes.

“Key” Persons, Parity, and Symmetry

In many sustainable projects, principal committed persons could be identified. They managed to maintain the commitment of the concerned organization to carry on with the project, despite periodical fluctuations in the political atmosphere.
Palestinian participants, in particular, emphasized the need to maintain parity and symmetry while conducting collaborative projects to secure their long-term success. Equal division of work and responsibility between the partners was seen as an essential prerequisite. Over 50% of the Palestinian participants claimed that they would not have collaborated if parity and symmetry had not been preserved. Promoting cooperation between institutions, rather than individuals, and using existing services/agencies, rather than developing new ones, were shown to be a priori conditions for sustainability.

Role of Public Health

It was shown that it was relatively easy to form a shared professional agenda and develop collaborative projects dealing with the health needs in the region. It was also realized that certain issues could not be addressed unless they were dealt with on a regional basis. Through such projects, large segments of the population were reached. Involvement of segments in the communities that are usually less vocal than the more politically oriented elements may help in building trust and influence public opinion in the direction of promoting peace and opposing violence. Health projects, in particular, can serve as a bridge to promote peace – an essential prerequisite for health.

In the final analysis, it is for the immediate parties involved in the conflict to find a way to settle their disagreements. However, the international community and in particular public health oriented agencies could serve as facilitators and advocates for peace. The process of reconciliation is a long and difficult one requiring continuous efforts with only small steps at a time. To support such effort, a central (international) “clearing house” is advocated, which will coordinate and monitor the various activities.

Conclusions

The Israeli-Palestinian experience in collaborative projects in (public) health has demonstrated that despite tragic hostile events and marked fluctuations in the political atmosphere cooperation could be carried on. Thousands of people of both sides were involved and vital health services were provided to populations in need.

Professional-to-professional connections were established and major changes in attitude to and perception of the other side were made. The academic and professional communities in both sides should realize their duty to serve as a bridge to develop understanding and acceptance of the rival community. Their involvement provides the seeds for future trust building and promoting peaceful coexistence.

To maintain and expand collaborative efforts, the principles of parity, mutual respect, symmetry in responsibility, and financial transparency must be observed.

To achieve these goals, regional or international agencies can play a major role in many aspects (e.g., financial and expertise) and can act as facilitators of contacts between the two rival groups. Because of severity of the current situation and the enormous costs in life and suffering (9), international involvement must be encouraged and expanded. Such activities should be pursued and existing institutions should be used in helping committed individuals of both sides.

The success of large-scale collaborative projects in the past, and the sustainability of some of them even in the troubled present, is a proof that with determination such activities will continue to serve as seeds for future mutual understanding and peace building processes.

References

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Received: January 8, 2002
Accepted: February 3, 2002

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