

Restructuring the Palestinian Health Care System to Meet the Needs of the Future

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I would like to approach the subject of the need to re-structure the Palestinian health care system by focusing on raising two general questions and introducing elements that would encourage debate in fruitful directions. The way I perceive my task today is to try as much as possible to separate myself from diplomatic endeavors, and concentrate instead on addressing key issues in health policy formulation and planning that are the precondition for the much needed restructuring.

The first question that needs to be raised is the question of: restructuring the Palestinian health care system for what purpose and whose benefit?

At this stage, it is clear that the Authorities have begun their attempt to restructure the health care system. So far, evidence strongly suggests that the Authorities are keen to restructure for control and for the maintenance of the status quo, i.e. for the interest of the authorities and not the population. Take for example the advertisement published in the newspapers recently warning non-governmental organizations, including those working in the health care sector, to re-register within a very short period, or otherwise, they would be considered 'dissolved'. I as well as many others found such action quite striking, and revealing as well: registration of the same NGO's who have made it possible, along with other sectors of Palestinian society, for the Authority to come into being in the first place? More importantly, registration of NGO's without first developing laws, rules and regulations that would 'monitor' the activities in the NGO sphere, and without including these NGO's who have substantial experience in supporting this country's needs during many years of military rule, in the process of formulating these laws in order to arrive at the best laws possible that would ensure adequate monitoring, flexibility to meet social need and at the same time that would ensure that the Authorities would not utilize the registration arena as an instrument of erratic decision making and political control? Where is the accountability of the Authorities in all this?

The second example of attempts to re-structure the health care system that definitely do not enter the book as being for the sake of the health of people is the case of appointments in the health sector: I do not really know who is in charge, and we need to know always, but especially in situations of crisis, like the recent Cholera epidemic in Gaza: is it Fathi Arafat, as a letter endorsed by Mr. Yaser Arafat told us and international aid - the letter states that Fathi Arafat continues to

be the person in charge of dealing with international aid, and, therefore, in effect, he becomes the ultimate authority at the moment. Or is it our Health Minister, Dr. Zaanoun? But then what about the Director of Health on the West Bank? And what about the Palestinian Health Council, which often presents as the health authority in this country, certainly to international aid agencies as well as others? Does anyone know their job descriptions, their mandate, their system of accountability, the extent of their authority? Do they know the answers to these questions? I think not.

The results of such attempts to restructure for control is not only confusion, but very dangerous as well: on the local level, they threaten to destroy whatever we have built over many years, and threatens a future very serious crisis in the health care system that can only lead to worsening health conditions, dissatisfaction, demoralization, the rise of extremism and instability. All we need to do is read the literature from other countries documenting how such actions during periods of transition from colonialism and war to autonomy and nationhood have led to health crises, other crises and violence, to realize that we will fall into the same fate, unless we begin to seriously address the issue differently and proceed to restructure for the benefit of the majority, and not for the control of the few. On the international level, such actions have led many international aid agencies to withhold much needed funding because of the confusion, the lack of decision making systems, the lack of transparency and accountability within the authorities' structures. Should this go on, it would prove to be disastrous for the nation.

The second question I would like to raise for discussion is: who formulates health policies, and utilizing what approach to policy formulation in health and development?

In very general terms, formulation of policies for social entitlement, including health, education, social services etc., has taken one of two approaches: one approach to social entitlement focuses on attempting to assist marginalized and deprived groups to not fall 'out of society altogether' in a rather charitable approach of assistance and the maintenance of rock bottom minimum living standards. Another approach to social entitlement entails the notion that a citizen of a country is entitled to basic health, educational, and social services as a right of birth and as a fundamental human right. Moreover, one approach entails the definition of policy from the top down, with one or two 'experts' formulating everything, probably without being informed by a knowledge of the area, or practice, while the other entails the participation of those who have long worked in the field, NGO's and otherwise in an active debate and discussion over what best policies to formulate, given particular circumstances. This approach also entails the participation of everyone in the process of monitoring, evaluation, re-formulation of policy and

further planning.

In this area, there is rising suspicion that the top down approach is being utilized by the authorities today to set the future policies, including the health policies of this country. There is also suspicion that it is the charitable approach that other people's are forsaking that is being adopted. I have recently succeeded in having the great privilege of having access to a draft document presented to the Authorities delineating social entitlement policies. I and others read it very carefully, and maintain that the document represents amazing eclecticism: on the one hand, the author goes on and on about the need to move into civil society and the role of NGO's. On the other hand, every other sentence dictates the control of the Authorities over policies and the reduction of the role of NGO's to delivering services to those groups that the authorities cannot handle: you drop on them your burdens and you keep the benefits! What is even more striking is the fact that such documents and policies are not published, not distributed for the population to read and discuss, but are merely presented to the few so that they could decide the fate of the rest.

This is not what a move to civil society means. Rather, it means the maintenance of the flexibility, independence and creativity of NGO's and other groupings and sectors composing Palestinian society, and their incorporation into policy formulation, planning, monitoring, evaluation and action. It means the appreciation of their experience, the understanding of their problems, and the utilization of their knowledge in practice to serve those unfortunate people called Palestinians. It means their animation and working with them in partnership rather than an attempt to control them and especially their sources of funding.

It is my contention that NGO's, especially in the health sector, have performed and will continue to perform a crucial role for the benefit of the majority. It is also my contention that the health and other NGO's form the nucleus for our hope to develop of a healthy Palestinian society in the future. It is also my contention that, at this stage, the Authorities are in a pressing need for the activities, partnership, skills and experience of the NGO's. So let us start the re-structuring process by developing structures of re-presentation and policy formulation based on experience and professionalism, not personal allegiances and factional interest. Let us develop ongoing committees of dialogue and mutual respect, composed of all the groups and parties that have so far made Palestinian history. Let us work together based on the sound principles of democracy and working for public good.