



Introduction:

EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth Middle East is a unique organization that in 1994 for the very first time brought together Palestinian, Jordanian and Israeli environmentalists to work together under a single board. Over the past 15 years the organization has grown from an all voluntary staff working out of rooms in offices of other organizations, to opening up its own offices in Bethlehem, Amman and Tel-Aviv where today 50 paid professional staff members are employed and hundreds of volunteers involved.

Three distinct periods can be discerned in the short history of the organization. From 1994 to 1998 FoEME was predominately involved in leading efforts for developing sustainable livelihoods (UNEP report - OECD peace building pillars). The work of the organization was focused on protecting the environment from the lack of crossborder cooperation related to conflict and from overdevelopment being proposed within the framework of advancing the peace process. Reflecting on the "Enlightenment Rift and Peacebuilding: Rationality, Spirituality, and Shared Waters" paper by Aaron Wolf this period of FoEME's development can be seen as one of near complete reliance on analytical skills. Though not always approached from an adversarial perspective and certainly involving a regional geographical scope from the outset, the work of the organization nevertheless acted from a very rational, single minded focus on the environment.

The second period in the short history of the organization is from 1998 to 2001 where the organization experienced great turmoil both internally and externally - greatly impacted by the failure of the Oslo Accords to improve the lives of people and advance peace.

The third period is from 2001 to the present where the organization had to reinvent itself and reconsider its mandate, all in the midst of unprecedented violence. In order to remain relevant, the organization came to realize that it had to take a leading role in peacebuilding through grassroots efforts undertaken through dialogue, confidence building and cooperation activities focused on actual crossborder resources that could directly benefit people. From the perspective of Aaron Wolf's paper this era for the organization is far more integrative, having to deal with the conflicting and competing political, economic and social interests that exist both within each community and society and between crossborder communities and societies. This period reflects the very action orientated approach of the organization as exists today, having to show concrete results and benefits on almost a daily basis in order to maintain the trust of residents and community leaders.

From this unique experience of 15 years of peacebuilding in one of the most intractable conflict areas in the world, FoEME can point to many lessons both positive and negative that can assist other organizations in their efforts and interested academics to better understand the dynamics at work.

Lesson Learnt:

Reinventing Oneself as Circumstances Change so that the Organization is Relevant to the Changing Peacebuilding Needs:

The organization was founded in 1994 at a time of optimism, when there was belief in a process that people thought would shortly result in peace. Since obtaining 'peace' was considered doable the organization focused on the quality of peace from an environmental perspective. The literature of the organization from that time highlighted the phrase 'sustainable peace' reflecting the belief of the organization that the peace being forged by our governments was ecologically unsustainable.

In this period the organization advanced its objective of leading 'sustainable peace' focused on traditional avenues of crossborder environmental advocacy. Over development beyond the carrying capacity of the region's natural resources, such as the proposed building of 50,000 new hotel rooms around the Dead Sea or an international eight lane highway proposed along the Jordan Valley, was the focus of concern in the eyes of the young environmentalists that created the organization. We saw an urgent need to advocate processes of sustainable development, balancing the needs of people and nature, but recognizing that only through a regional effort could we possibly succeed to place the issue on the political agenda of the Arab/Israeli peace process.

Creating a common vision around a shared ecosystem by bringing together experts from the three countries involved was from the early days of the organization recognized as a necessary first step for advocacy purposes. As the OECD peacebuilding pillars reflect, FoEME was leading efforts in developing sustainable livelihoods. FoEME would hire a Palestinian, Jordanian and Israeli expert, in-house or consultant, to propose sustainable solutions for the shared ecosystems. For the Dead Sea for instance, the organization in preparing advocacy reports or common position papers would ask: What is important about the Dead Sea area? Why has the area been so environmentally compromised and how can the political, economic and development activities in place be altered so as to strike a more balanced approach both between the peoples sharing the ecosystem and between the needs of people and the needs of nature.

By 1998, however, it was clear to all that the Oslo process was failing peoples' needs and expectations, with the peace process becoming so sour that the term 'peace process' was associated with negative connotations of increased violence and preserving the status quo. The overdevelopment that had been proposed by government was now seen as a pipe dream, not within reach and no longer politically relevant.

FoEME itself was increasingly being condemned and attacked as an arm of this failed peace effort, seen by some on both sides as a fraud or conspiracy to maintain the status quo. Arab/Israeli cooperation was labeled collaboration, serving the interests of the 'other side'.

In the transition period of 1998 to 2001 FoEME changed direction in its environmental peacebuilding efforts focusing more on how the renewed conflict was polluting shared environmental resources and promoting the need for cooperation for the sake of the medium and long-term interests of both people. FoEME's series of policy papers on protecting the

Mountain Aquifer from sewage and solid waste pollution reflect the continued top down advocacy work carried out at this time.

Even prior to the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2001, FoEME understood that medium and long-term interests were not sufficiently relevant in the midst of ever increasing violence, loss of hope and trust and that it must speak to the immediate concerns of people.. The idea of complimenting top-down advocacy efforts with bottom-up community led activism was born sometime during this interim phase. By co-incidence when funding was finally secured for the Good Water Neighbors project in late 2000, the new crossborder community based effort was almost cancelled with the outbreak of all out violence in 2001, as funders believed that crossborder efforts were no longer viable.

FoEME was however, able to convince funders that community level cooperation was possible and the project was launched in early 2001, initially involving 11 communities - 5 Palestinian, 5 Israeli and 1 Jordanian, and growing to include 26 communities today - 9 Palestinian, 8 Israeli and 9 Jordanian communities ranging from large cities to small villages.

Barriers to overcome:

The key barrier to overcome that has allowed FoEME to advance environmental peacemaking in the midst of violence has been the lack of concrete benefits and the need to show how communities can and are presently able to benefit from the cooperative relations established, despite the continued conflict - politically, economically and socially, often all interlinked.

Through the synergy created by combining top-down with bottom-up peacemaking strategies, FoEME can today identify a host of major achievements including: placing the key regional issues of saving the Dead Sea and rehabilitating the River Jordan on the decision making table, being heavily involved in reform of crossborder water management institutions and leveraging over 70 million US dollars invested or earmarked for the participating Good Water Neighbor communities - be they investments in water supply and sanitation projects, environmental education centers or tourism through Neighbor's Paths developed and the proposed creation of a cross border peace park.

When originally launched, the Good Water Neighbors project struggled to convince the 11 original participating communities that they would benefit through the cooperative activities launched. Today FoEME has more communities seeking to join the project than funds available to enable their participation. Jenin and Yatta, as part of the Hebron Governorate, are an example of two Palestinian communities that just joined the program with a clear and specific list of projects that they seek to implement with the crossborder support of their neighboring community.

Undoubtedly it is FoEME's experience that the combination of top-down advocacy and bottom-up community led action are reflective of the rational versus emotional / personal relationship building that Aaron Wolf's paper speaks to and that as circumstances change the mix of these two ingredients need to change accordingly.