



### **Overview of Lebanon CTM Workshop CCSD INTRAC November 2006**

The Middle East workshops took place in 2006 and in 2007. NGOs, think tanks and civil society groups were represented from more than ten countries of the region. The main preoccupations at these meetings concerned war, Israeli occupation and military aggression as well as economic and social insecurity created out of this situation. The effects upon vulnerable groups such as women, children and the elderly are a real concern, as well as the rising numbers of refugees from the war in Iraq.

There were also strong arguments made about the need to recognise the differences between resistance and terrorism. There was also concern about the absence of democratically elected governments and the repression sustained and nurtured by Israeli occupation which is used as an excuse by many Arab governments to suppress civil society. Many of these are allied to western donors.

The concepts of terror and counter-terror are omnipresent in this region. The 2004 US Presidential election was characterised by the 'politics of fear'. The US 9/11 commission report states that countering terrorism has become beyond doubt the top national security priority of the United States and that non-state actors are seen as a threat to national security.

It was argued in the regional workshops that some NGOs in the Levant (such as in Lebanon and Egypt for example), acted to assist the interests of capital, and counteracting the desire of citizens to focus on the role and participation of civil society generally not just through the existing culture of foreign styled NGOs as they have been seen to operate in this region.

People in the region also view the current context as a period of rapid and dramatic change, because the kinds of wars being experienced in more than one country, and are concerned that this is in reality an externally inspired project to transform the Middle East from a 'Greater' Middle East to the 'New Middle East'. This is evident from the Palestinian case, the occupied Arab lands, the Israel-Arab conflict, interference, and wars that create conflicts and divide people. There is no state in the region today that remains unaffected. Most societies are facing ruin and sectarian conflicts have spread from Iraq to all the neighbouring countries. Lebanon as a small country is the most acutely affected. It was once a society dominated by pluralist values where people were allowed to make different political choices. But the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Golan Heights, and Shebaa Farms has changed this. As a result of this, resistance developed and had become very strong by 2000. Consequently military attacks were continuously planned against Hizbollah, Syria, and Iran (the countries which have resisted the plans for a 'New Middle East').

The aim of the United States for a 'New Middle East' is based on a very confused strategy. The US fears most of all resistance and wants to disarm groups such as Hizbollah.

In one of the most recent wars in July 2006 Lebanon was attacked for 33 days by Israel (leaving 1000 dead, 400 children, 4000 injured). The Israelis left mine fields as well as more than two million cluster bombs throughout the south of the country and refused to hand over maps to clear the mines and bombs. As a result tragedies continue in south Lebanon, with scores of deaths and injuries.

Although the Israeli's were obliged to withdraw, the right to retaliate stayed with Israel – exemplified by numerous UN resolutions which are unfair to the national interests of Lebanon and rarely monitored when they are violated by Israel. The Lebanese National Liberation is a resistance movement created to defend the rights of Lebanese citizens to their land and to free it from occupation. It has no military support from outside. Similarly Hamas in Palestine has been labelled as a terrorist organisation, yet it was partly democratically elected in free and fair elections. But the United States and Europe instead supported groups that had lost in the elections because Hamas did not fit the international plans for a new Middle East. Hence the irony and the double standards of the war against terrorism for which the heaviest price is being paid for by vulnerable citizens of both Palestine and Lebanon (and Iraq) at the frontline. There are few NGOs which have been able to confront and work for the political rights of citizens in the region. Most governments are working closely with the west to support a confused and misguided strategy for a new Middle East.

It is vitally important for any civil society dialogue to recognise the difference between terrorism and resistance and Harkat-e-Islam and Hamas and Hizbollah are important. Their ideologies and labels differ. Hizbollah is a shiite political organisation that is largely pragmatic and not purely theologically based. It is against the forces of multinational power and against globalisation. The Christian Party and Harkat-e-Islam are different. These differences are around the challenges of occupation, democracy, and nature of political change as well as about social development. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is democratic because these movements do change their vision with time. This is never understood or acknowledged by Western interpretations.

In the current crisis in Lebanon there have been gross interferences from outside the country, from several sources, with systematic attempts to further divide civil society along sectarian lines and undermine local resistance. If such plans succeed it can only increase chaos. Justice is possible only when people's rights are considered. But this is problematic when in the south of Lebanon alone some 25 towns were destroyed and littered by three million cluster bombs, 450,000 mines, 165,000 bombs, and toxic weapons, discovered following the cessation of hostilities in the 2006 war. There has been a failure so far to take these issues to an international tribunal. The resistance movement in Lebanon is creating a democratic experience for the Muslim populations especially in the south of the country and the capital.

In addition, a recent meeting of civil society groups in Paris (2007) from the region had positive outcomes for Lebanon. Democracy is defined by the NGOs as working for others, thinking and dying for others, serving others, secularism and building citizenship, and working together. We have to consider civil society as family, city, and inclusive also of people residing in the remotest regions. We have to find solutions, thinking positively and with optimism, and not only about problems of how

to get funds and about authoritarian democracy, but building a civil society and a strong state. Lebanon's problems will remain until the Palestinian problem is resolved.

There is a need for clarity on three issues – democracy, development and resistance. Currently development is defined by the hegemonic control over production relations and the retreat of the State from provision of services. This gives rise to resistance as the State becomes distanced from people's problems, and this resistance is labelled as terrorism. We need to explore why resistance remains local. But, at the same time, the nature of democracy changes as democracy and human rights become the tools of hegemonic development as MNC based-countries take advantage of their power and their states act on behalf of MNCs as they share a common interest.