The Contribution of Law and Social Work to Interdisciplinary Community Development and Peace Building in the Middle East

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SUMMARY. Reducing inequity and strengthening civil society are both intrinsically related to peace building. This article outlines how social work and legal theory, coupled with an interdisciplinary practice framework, advance the development of community networks for the promotion of social rights as a medium for peace building in the Middle East. The combined effect of human rights advocacy, civic engagement, and the structuring and building of community, work to reduce inequality and promote civil society. Examples of interdisciplinary practice as implemented through the initiative of the McGill Middle East Program in Civil Society and Peace Building are presented. Finally, implications...
for interdisciplinary training for schools of social work are discussed.

**KEYWORDS.** Peace, interdisciplinary, civil society, social work, law, Middle East, Israel, Jordan, Palestine

**INTRODUCTION**

In 1993, the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, more widely known as the Oslo Accords, was signed by Israeli and Palestinian leaders. The Declaration was to have created a context for mutual recognition of the legitimate right of each nation, Palestinian and Israeli alike, to assert its own national identity. At the time of the signing, the Oslo Accords were considered to be a tremendous step toward peace in Israeli-Palestinian relations. The recognition of two distinct nations, each striving for growth, development and a sense of control over its own destiny, seemed to create new opportunities for coexistence and greater prospects for social and economic links. In the absence of violence, monies could be channeled to economic development, the reduction of poverty, and the creation of strong social networks within and between the societies—all of which were seen as crucial for sustainable peace. Few imagined that less than 10 years later, the optimism that characterized everyday life at the time of the signing of the Accords would deteriorate into an alarming escalation of violence and fear. By May 2000, the expectation that the signing of the Accords would create a context for political, economic and social relationships across borders was replaced by renewed aggression, collapsing peace talks, dwindling economic activity and the breakdown of trust between Israelis and Palestinians.

Within this reality both Palestinian and Israeli societies have witnessed growing poverty, increasing inequality and the retraction of government commitment to the needs of its people as evidenced by diminishing social rights and entitlements (Lior, 2002) and increasing restrictions on individual freedoms and liberties (Amnesty International, 1998). Growing uncertainty, greater restrictions on civil liberties and increased poverty and inequality set the stage for confusion, anger and rage, which have
produced heightened violence and extremist behavior in the Middle East. To date, the political efforts of leaders to secure a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been futile. The most recent victory of the Hamas Party in the 2006 Palestinian elections led to the complete breakdown of the negotiating process between the leaders of the two societies, and violence continues. The time will come, however, when Palestinian and Israeli leaders will resume the peace talks. Yet even upon their return to the negotiating table, it is evident that government efforts alone cannot promote the necessary conditions for a sustainable peace (Saunders, 1999). Rather, the ability of Palestinian and Israeli societies and their peoples will be put to the test of ensuring the sustainability of the conditions that facilitate peace building.

This article addresses the role of societies within the Middle East context in promoting conditions for sustainable peace both in periods characterized by the breakdown of political efforts as well as in times of the advancement of those efforts. The article details the role of the professional community, in particular that of social work and law, in promoting the conditions that enhance communal ability to promote a “positive peace” (Reardon, 1988) that goes beyond political efforts to attain an end to war. The article describes the conceptual framework of the McGill Middle East Program in Civil Society and Peace Building. The interdisciplinary framework is used as a medium for peace building and the advancement of a social rights based network in Palestinian, Israeli and Jordanian societies. The article defines the model and presents examples of its use as a vehicle for the promotion of peace. Given the complexity of current socio-political and economic contexts throughout the world, implications for training in social work schools are presented.

**POSITIVE PEACE**

Positive peace refers to the creation of a reality characterized by social justice, political participation, ecological balance and economic equity (Reardon, 1988). Positive peace has been associated with processes seeking to eradicate “hunger, poverty, ignorance, exploitation [and] unemployment” (Bess, 1993, p. 182). It seeks to address the social and economic conditions that hinder human development and includes the recognition of both individual and collective rights (Shivji, 1989). The concept constructs a broad arena for proactive peace building activity. Positive peace suggests that the active pursuit for its realization requires movement towards the creation of a more socially just reality. As conditions
that contribute to crime and violence are minimized within a society, the basis for the advancement of more peaceful relationships between societies is reinforced (Gil, 1998).

The attainment of positive peace implies that basic human needs must be addressed in order to ensure opportunities for human development and growth. Concrete needs such as food, housing, education and health care, as well as the more abstract need for belonging, freedom and autonomy, are fundamental to the building of societies characterized by greater equality. They are essential for the prevention of protracted conflict (Burton, 1990). While government leaders may bring an end to conflict, official processes alone which are hierarchical in nature, cannot deliver the goods of peace. Instead, Lederach (1998, p. 242) proposes that in the aftermath of the signing of a peace agreement, an organic approach that “envisions peace building as a web of interdependent activities and people” is appropriate. This blend—the promotion of human needs, the reduction of inequality and the structuring of networks of interdependent people and activities to address these—requires interdisciplinary cooperation as well as an active civil society. How do the reduction of inequality and the strengthening of civil society intertwine to advance conditions fundamental to the creation of societies capable of living together peacefully?

Inequality fosters marginalization and exclusion from mainstream society (Room, 1999). Marginalized groups are excluded from “equality before the law; participation in the democratic process; public goods; the nation or the dominant race; the family and sociability; humane treatment, respect …” (Silver, 1994, p. 541). Marginalization and social exclusion hinder the ability of individuals and collectives to be treated as and to act as citizens (Lister, 1998). They limit opportunities to access rights and entitlements of citizenship (Miller, 1993), and to act in a reciprocal manner with the society that grants those rights. Growing inequality and the breakdown of interdependent relationships have far-reaching implications not only for the socially excluded but for society as a whole as well (Marris, 1999; Silver, 1994). Societies characterized by growing inequality and social exclusion experience increasing divisiveness and fragmentation (Woolcock, 2001; Torczyner, 2000). The “social glue” that holds a society together as a coherent entity diminishes (Gilbert, 1998). Deteriorating networks of social solidarity are further compounded, as those who are marginalized employ resistance measures to counter social, economic and political exclusion and to demand rights and reciprocity (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Gurr & Harff, 1994).
Rising domestic inequality and the breakdown of social cohesion have bearing on relationships between societies as well. Gil (1998) reinforces the nexus between domestic inequality, the breakdown of mutually beneficial relationships, and the odds for international peace. He notes that “societies that initiated relations of domination and exploitation and conditions of injustice on small scales and local levels tended to extend these relations beyond their populations and territories” (p. 5). Governments that fail to respond to citizen welfare invite growing despair and alienation. The cycle that reinforces inequality and the breakdown of social solidarity hampers the ability of a government to enlist citizen loyalty to support the demands that maneuver the transition from conflict to coexistence (Gil, 1998; Forsythe, 1991).

This cycle can be alleviated. Two interlocking components are central to the approach. The first component calls for the promotion of universal social entitlements such as the right to housing, the right to health care, education, employment and social security and more. These rights embody basic human needs crucial to procuring peace (Burton, 1990) and ensure the dignity of each and every human being as set forth in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The second component involves the empowerment of disadvantaged populations, those most in need of social entitlements, in order that they may actively advocate for their rights and act as citizens by means of a human rights advocacy approach.

**Human Rights Advocacy**

Human rights advocacy is concerned with the realization of rights in a more equitable manner. According to Torczyner (2001), human rights advocacy stems from a theory of disentitlement. Disentitlement is defined as “a process through which persons lose the ability to access rights and influence relationships” (Torsczyner, 2001, p. 87). Processes of disentitlement occur on four interconnecting levels, the personal, the communal, the institutional and the political and illustrate the interaction between both internal and external forces that prevent individuals and communities from accessing their entitlements and rights. On the personal level disentitlement occurs when individuals believe that they do not deserve rights. Living in poverty, the poor oftentimes blame themselves for their impoverishment by failing to recognize systemic disentitlement. On a communal level, disentitlement occurs when communities are fragmented and unable to organize to ensure their entitlements. Fragmented communities often lack social, economic and
political power necessary to influence decisions that affect their collective welfare. As such they are left without rights and without the ability to impact on the powers that ensure those rights. Institutions contribute to disentitlement when they are inaccessible, when they construct language and cultural barriers, and when they fail to inform the public of their entitlements. Barriers, budget cuts and poor service lend to an inability to access entitlements that are available by law. Finally, disentitlement is reinforced on a political level when governments opt to bestow rights and entitlements on particular communities and not others. Discriminatory laws and regulations and arbitrary restrictions render entire populations on the margins of society.

These four levels of disentitlement corroborate to reinforce the inability of marginalized individuals and communities to access their entitlements, and influence the relationships and opportunities that would in fact ensure these rights. Torczyner (2000, p. 133) suggests that “a theory of disentitlement operationalizes the agenda for human rights advocacy.” Human rights advocacy is characterized by a combination of both legal and popular action. Human rights advocacy practice mobilizes the capacity of disadvantaged individuals and communities to ensure more equitable distribution of resources, and as such links notions of rights with the building of networks of association and a civil society that makes demands for greater equality on its government (Kaul, 1988; Heenan, 1997). It is in the process of asserting their rights that citizens develop "a new sense of efficacy; people who ordinarily consider themselves helpless come to believe that they have some capacity to alter their lot" (Piven & Cloward, 1979, p. 4).

**INTERDISCIPLINARY PEACE PRACTICE**

Access to rights and entitlements such as housing, water, health and education not only ensure the right itself but in addition guarantee the right of entry to social, legal, educational, medical structures and more as well. Access to rights provides meaning to the individual’s relationship to society and its institutions. Within such a context, civil society and peace building are possible and meaningful. Individual security and dignity are protected and well being and freedom are actualized (McGill Fellowship Program Brochure, 2006).

Creating networks of association to advance civil society, ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources, fostering reciprocal relationships, and peace building require interdisciplinary practice, that at one
and the same time, will advance social welfare, promote access to law, and guarantee respect for human rights. Social work and law are linked to issues central to positive peace. Equality, discrimination and participation are legal notions (Rosenberg, 1996). Social work practice is grounded in the building of community and community relationships that foster greater equality and participation in the struggle to reduce inequality (Bernstein, 1995; Walz & Groze, 1991). Social work and social welfare institutions protect vulnerable populations, mediate relationships among different groups, and promote inclusiveness. Law defines rights and obligations as they pertain to relationships between individuals, groups and the state. It articulates the expectations that are implicit in relationship (Moshe, 2001). The two disciplines share a concern for human relationships and the rights and responsibilities that govern them (Minow, 1990; Dominelli, 1997).

Having said this, law is often criticized for lacking the ability to advance an agenda that promotes greater equality and social inclusion in practice. Law situates its search for equality in legal discourse debated in the legal system—a system that is autonomous and values precedence, conservatism, neutrality and rational argument. These oftentimes disregard the everyday life experiences of individuals and communities that can be very different from acceptable norms as created by the State. As a result, “law ends up contributing rather than challenging assigned categories of difference that manifest social prejudice and misunderstanding” (Minow, 1990, p. 9), thereby, advancing the sentiment that the legal system and litigation alone are “an unreliable lever to effect social change” (McCann, 1994, p. 88). Moreover, dependence on the legal system can have a disempowering as opposed to an empowering effect. Groups seeking redress rely on the legal system, and in the process often lose the momentum of community anger as a political force to address the issue at hand. When issues wallow in the courts, the one spark that pushed community fervor often dissipates weakening the organization for future struggle.

What has been suggested as an alternative is an approach that views law as a process within a social field rather than as an autonomous instrument. Law as social practice becomes a tool through which practical interactions among citizens are defined (Munalula, 1995). Made accessible, the law functions as a framework to debate social relationships. “Decentered” law (Villmoare, 1991, p. 401) is then viewed as an integral aspect of people’s daily lives. Popularized, it serves as a vehicle to empower the marginalized-those most in need of the relational aspects of law to ensure greater equality and social and economic inclusion.
(Lister, 1998). Rosenberg (1996) suggests that “legal notions such as discrimination, rights and equality can mobilize individuals to organize and engage in social struggle…” (p. 436). Rights provide a powerful language for pursuing goals, and that rights language makes for stronger claims on the state than does the language of needs or interests. Moreover, the process of “interpreting rights as practices, as legitimate expectations” appears to impact on “the interconnectedness of social relations” (Villmoare, 1991, p. 387-388). Popularization of the law as a mechanism to mobilize claims both facilitates and is facilitated by social relations among diverse groups.

The legal profession alone is not equipped to popularize the law and organize disadvantaged citizens groups against wrongful social conditions that deprive them of their basic moral and legal rights. The social work profession is engaged with the social; with individuals and communities on the margins. Fostering the development of strong social capital and cohesive communities is integral to community development practice (Lister, 1998), and includes aspects of citizenship and civic consciousness, the establishment of cooperative relationships and the strengthening of democracy (Khinduka, 1979). For example, Woolcock (2001) suggests that “living on the margins of existence, the social capital of the poor is one asset they can potentially draw upon to help negotiate their way through an unpredictable and unforgiving world” (p. 15). Transforming this asset into a mechanism for community organizing and rights advocacy is the bread and butter of the social work profession and the essence of the McGill Middle East Program in Civil Society and Peace Building.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND PEACE BUILDING: THE MCGILL MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

Over the last decade the social work profession has recognized the necessity of incorporating the human rights discourse in its struggle to ensure human dignity and equality (Ife, 1998). The language of the profession has moved from that of a “needs approach” to that of a “rights approach.” This new awareness has placed social workers, trained in the skills of community relationship building and versed in the language of rights and entitlements, at a critical junction to assist in the promotion of rights and relationships, particularly critical in a global world where inter-communal conflicts are growing (Witte, 1996).
The combined effect of community relationship building and a rights approach are illustrated through the McGill Middle East Program in Civil Society and Peace Building (MMEP), an innovative initiative operating for the advancement of positive peace in the Middle East over the last decade. At the heart of the program is the concept that social work and law—two disciplines concerned with notions of rights and relationships—work interdependently to ensure the conditions that promote relationships among peoples of diversity both within and between societies. This approach has led to the securing of social rights, the development of civil society and peace building among Israelis, Jordanians and Palestinians. It has endured over time, despite the political roller coaster that characterizes the Middle East, and raises an interesting query into the role of the professional community in advancing societal involvement in the promotion of peace. The MMEP was established in The School of Social Work at McGill University in Montreal Canada in 1997, and incorporates program components to promote the reduction of inequality and the strengthening of civil society.

**Interdisciplinary Practice Centers**

Two particular aspects of the McGill Middle East Program illustrate its interdisciplinary nature. First, is the work of interdisciplinary practice centers established by the McGill Middle East Program and partner academic institutions and civil society organizations in Israel, Palestine and Jordan. Five rights-based community empowerment practice centers have been initiated in the Middle East. The centers works autonomously within Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian societies while functioning under the shared conceptual umbrella. Common practice structures characterize the centers. First, they are located in the most disadvantaged and the most ethnically diverse communities in their respective cities. The centers’ location makes access for the poorest populations, those most disentitled, readily available. Second, the centers offer walk-in services to address personal experiences of disentitlement. The service is offered primarily by volunteers from the community, many of whom have themselves experienced disentitlement and been assisted by the centers. Third, the centers are volunteer-based. Community volunteers participate in decision making processes that impact on the policies of the practice centers. Fourth, the centers engage in outreach work to identify common issues of disentitlement and recruit the community and volunteers to organize around them. Fifth, the centers counter communal, institutional and political levels of
disentitlement through community organization and empowerment. And finally, the centers maintain a combined social work and legal approach employing both social workers and lawyers.

Within these structures, the centers share common goals (Torczyner, 2001).

- To teach communities to advocate in order to access their rights, to identify solutions to common problems and to participate in decision making bodies that affect their welfare.
- To provide information and expertise regarding rights and entitlements.
- To provide training in advocacy and organizing techniques.
- To promote community participation enabling diverse social and ethnic groups to work together to solve common issues.
- To attain policy and legal reform to benefit the disadvantaged.
- To identify precedent-setting cases that emanate from national policy or law to defend and promote the rights of disadvantaged individuals and communities.

In Jordan, Israel and Palestine, the ability of each practice center to identify issues as rights and to organize communities accordingly, provides the framework for interdisciplinary action that not only brings together professionals from the fields of law and social work, but also those from relevant additional disciplines. Examples of organizing practice around issues of disentitlement illustrate how the interdisciplinary approach to human rights advocacy is operationalized.

In Jordan. The Sweilah Community Development Center in Amman conducts legal, educational and empowerment programs for women regarding their rights under Islam. Rights are employed as mechanisms for community building among the women as they work together to promote individual and collective entitlements. For example, the center ran an advocacy campaign for women victimized by a micro fund project loan scheme. Women were provided with loans for economic development projects through the assistance of employees at a government ministry, whose officials were aware of the womens’ inevitable inability to repay the loan. Many of the women who were illiterate signed legally binding documents. The center organized the women to provide legal counsel and arranged for funding to assist them to repay the loans. Social workers in the center utilized the process to assist the women to create relationships among themselves and with relevant Jordanian institutions.
Lawyers provided legal knowledge and guidance and linked the women with experts in Islamic law from the Jordanian Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

In another example, the center director, a social worker by profession who was versed in rights knowledge, assisted in advocating for policy change in the realm of housing. Outreach in the Sweilah community revealed unacceptable housing conditions for many of the residents. In one case, a family’s socio-economic condition meant that a young man was sleeping in the same room as his two sisters, and thus leaving them unprotected from his abuse. Recognizing the contextual limitations in coping with sexual abuse, the center director broached the issue from a housing rights perspective and approached Habitat for Humanity, an American organization, to discuss the building of an additional room. Although the case was strong, the director of Habitat in Jordan confirmed that their policy was to work only in rural areas. The director pursued and his persistence ultimately led Habitat’s Washington office to review their housing policy. The International NGO has now requested that 25 special housing cases in the Sweileh area be addressed in the coming year (MMEP, 2005). Having established a solid relationship with the director of the Community Development Center in Sweilah, the director of Habitat was persuaded to visit with the directors of the Israeli and Palestinian practice centers to determine how the organizations could work jointly to address housing issues in each of the societies. The Jordanian examples illustrate how knowledge of rights and the ability to build relationships are used as a mechanisms to organize individuals and communities, to bridge with institutions and empower disadvantaged communities, to impact on policy change and finally to advance peace building.

In Israel. Within Israel approximately 85,000 Bedouin reside in villages unrecognized by the Israeli government. The villages are considered to be unrecognized in that they constitute part of an on-going land dispute between the Israeli government and the Bedouin population. Until this situation is resolved, unrecognized villages do not receive basic services from the government, among them running water. Outreach work enabled the practice center, Singur Kehillati-Community Advocacy to identify the issue and recognize it as a rights-based matter. Organizing to ensure clean drinking water required interdisciplinary expertise. Through a rights approach, the recognition of the right to water enabled the practice center to engage a diverse group of professionals and community members—Jewish and Bedouin Arab alike—to advocate for the right. The center organized a coalition entitled “The Right to Water.” The coalition includes representatives from the Organization for Friends
of the Earth in the Middle East, The Regional Municipality for Unrecognized Bedouin Villages, The Center for Jewish Pluralism-The Reform Movement, The Negev Coexistence Forum, Singur Kehillati-Community Advocacy, Doctors for Human Rights, Shatil, the practice arm of The New Israel Fund, and representatives and activists from the Bedouin communities. The combined expertise of the coalition has been used to advance the right of the Bedouin residing in unrecognized villages to be provided with running water by the government. Particular to the organizing effort has been an approach to ensure that the right to water, a basic human right, is guaranteed despite the ongoing land controversy between the Israeli government and the Bedouin.

Social workers have provided the organizing impetus; lawyers the legal leverage. Doctors have attested to the health issues and water engineers the know-how regarding the laying of water pipes. The organizing process and bridging with professionals and organizations has had an empowering effect upon the Bedouin population and the manner in which they perceive themselves and their relationship with the government. The Bedouin community has become an organized community recognizing their entitlement to basic human rights.

Another example of the interdisciplinary work of Singur Kehillati-Community Advocacy is its food cooperatives. Food is a basic right. Organizing to ensure the right and in the process to empower communities has led to the establishment of three community-based food cooperatives with another two yet on the way. Close to 4,000 members support the cooperatives (Community Advocacy Brochure, 2006). Each of the cooperatives developed in accordance with the decisions of its particular members, yet a similar ideology permeates: the cooperatives are run by the members, and the members participate in decision-making process regarding the cooperatives. Members are responsible for each aspect of the operation of the cooperatives—correspondence with suppliers, pricing, selling, accounting and marketing. Co-op members gain expertise in each of these areas, through the support of professionals recruited by Singur Kehillati-Community Advocacy. Social workers support the organizing process. Lawyers provide the legal background. Accountants offer the financial know-how. Together these empower the co-op members as consumers, marketers, sales people, negotiators and budget managers. Ensuring the right to food has brought together individuals from a variety of communities that might not otherwise have the opportunity to cross paths, let alone work together—the elderly and the young, new immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia and Israeli veterans. In this capacity the food co-op functions as a community center where individuals meet,
issues of common concern are discussed and opportunities to organize the community created.

In Palestine. The An Najah Community Service Center in Nablus addresses a variety of rights-based issues, among them the right to health, education, housing and more. The activities of the center are organized by social workers together with a diverse group of professionals from various fields, as well as community volunteers. For example, the center works in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs Directorate in Nablus to improve the basic living conditions of the disadvantaged. Social workers and architects work together with community members to rehabilitate buildings. These efforts include building bathrooms in homes that have none and repairing dangerous structures. To date, the project, funded through a USAID program, has renovated one hundred and fifty dwellings. In addition, the Community Service Center addresses the rights of the impoverished elderly in the old city of Nablus. Fifteen community volunteers adopted thirty seniors to advocate for them and provide them with support, as well as regular home visits. Each semester, twenty pharmacy and social work students volunteer to lend their skills to the program. Finally, a group established by the Community Service Center assists disabled children who attend regular schools and their families to overcome the difficulties of integration. Activities include home visits, school visits, recreation and educational support. Community volunteers, supervised by the center staff, advocate for the rights of these children to be included in public community life by ensuring the availability and accessibility of appropriate facilities and opportunities.

In East Jerusalem the Al-Quds Community Action Center serves Palestinians, who by law are entitled to Israel’s National Insurance entitlements. The Palestinian center together with the Israeli center Singur Kehillati-Community Advocacy, both as part of the McGill Middle East Program network, spearheaded a coalition of Arab and Jewish organizations to persuade the Israeli government to change practices that made it difficult for Palestinians residing in East Jerusalem to access their rightful entitlements. Lobbying, media and research efforts of the coalition were successful. In December 2004, the National Insurance Institute released a report in which it agreed to: (1) form a clearly written policy regarding the investigative process that leads to either the denial of or access to National Insurance entitlements, (2) respond to all pending cases (of which many had been waiting up to 2 years) within 6 months, (3) provide a 45-day warning period prior to terminating social benefits and 90 days for terminating health benefits, (4) reform interrogation
methods especially those concerning children, (5) reform house investigation methods, (6) report the changes publicly in the various Hebrew and Arabic newspapers, (7) commit to follow-up meetings with the Coalition, and (8) expand its working knowledge of the East Jerusalem’s community needs pertaining to all social conditions affected and affecting insurance benefits (MMEP, 2005). Moreover, the Knesset obliged the National Insurance to report directly to the Knesset on a regular basis so as to ensure institutional accountability. While it is unclear how many residents of East Jerusalem will benefit from the work of the coalition, these changes in policy would not have been possible without the joint efforts of the Israeli and Palestinian organizations working together to fight inequality and promote human rights. These relationships have been advanced slowly, over a period of just under a decade. Once in place, they enabled the centers to cross the lines of conflict to ensure human rights and entitlements.

These examples demonstrate the link between inequality, rights-based organizing and peace building and shed light on the association between rights and relationship, and the roles of diverse professionals in promoting these. The training for social work professionals to engage in this process begins at McGill University in the School of Social Work.

**McGill Graduate Fellowship Program**

The McGill Graduate Fellowship Program is an additional aspect of the MMEP which trains for interdisciplinary practice and peace building. It offers a two-year Fellowship to individuals at the forefront of civil society and peace building in Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel. The Fellowship Program focuses on interdisciplinary practice in the fields of social work and social welfare, social housing, access to law and respect for human rights. At the end of the two-year program, Fellows obtain graduate degrees in social work through the MMEP International MSW Fellowship Program at McGill University. The two-year Fellowship includes one year of study and practice at the School of Social Work at McGill University and in the Montreal community, and one year of fieldwork at the practice centers in the Middle East. In addition to the social work courses required in the masters degree program at McGill University, four additional courses distinguish the first year of the Fellowship Program. First, the Fellows participate in a Community Practice Seminar, specially developed to provide Fellows with the opportunity to draw on their own knowledge and experience of their societies and issues of inequality within them, and to integrate these
into the conceptual framework of the Community Practice Centers back in the region. Second, renowned persons involved in the social, cultural, economic and political dimensions of peace building and development provide in-depth seminars to the Fellows through an interdisciplinary seminar series in peace building. Third, the Fellows study programs in the broad field of development and social policy, which may have particular relevance to the Middle East, at carefully selected community-based agencies, public institutions, voluntary organizations, and policy development bodies in Montreal. Finally, the Fellows participate weekly in an intensive three-hour dialogue session that aims to broaden their understanding of each other’s views, perceptions, convictions, and inner feelings surrounding important and difficult issues. Through these meetings the Fellows are introduced to the experiences of the “other” which is an important step towards relationship building and cross-cultural communication (MMEP, 2005).

In the second year of the program, Fellows return to the Middle East to work in a professional role in the interdisciplinary practice center in their society. There are four distinguishing features of the second year. Fellows return to implement ideas and programs that have been prioritized as central to the development of the center and reflect their learning from the Canadian experience. These priorities represent critical needs in the domains of social work and social welfare, and/or law and human rights. As such they lend themselves to shaping civil society and human rights. Third, the Fellows are required to prepare a research paper that focuses on rights and relationship building relevant to their own societies. Finally, having developed a regional perspective and establishing people-to-people relationships while at McGill University, the Fellows assist in the promotion of direct collaboration between the five practice centers and peace building in the region (MMEP, 2006).

**CONTRIBUTIONS TO PEACE BUILDING IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

The shared conceptual framework of the practice centers, and the people-to-people relationships that have been nurtured over time between the Fellows and among center directors, have led to the development of a regional network for rights-based community empowerment practice initiatives and peace building. The network defined four central areas for joint initiatives that go beyond the work of each individual center. These are bi-lateral exchanges, joint rights-based ventures, a
regional conference and combined research efforts. Bi-lateral exchange between the Palestinian, Israeli and Jordanian centers has enabled center directors and staff to share knowledge and experience as well as to participate in collective learning in areas relevant to their everyday work. An example of this can be found in the Jordanian practice center’s linking of Habitat for Humanity in Jordan to the Israeli and Palestinian practice centers to explore opportunities for cooperative work in the realm of housing. Bi-lateral exchange led to the establishment of parallel programs in Nablus and Amman. After visiting “The City of Flowers–City of Peace Program” developed by the center in Nablus, the director of the center in Amman, together with community volunteers established their own “City of Flowers.” The program plants flowers in the poorest neighbourhoods to ease the burden of poverty, disadvantage and conflict. In the last year a week-long “Fellowship Tour” brought together former Fellows for visits to the centers in East and West Jerusalem, Beersheva and Nablus. The Fellows had the opportunity to see how the operation of each of the centers and to learn first-hand about the work of their colleagues. Similarly, the visit enabled the Fellows to pursue relationships that began during their joint year of study in Canada.

The collaboration between the Palestinian and Israeli centers in East and West Jerusalem in regard to National Insurance rights and entitlements for the residents of East Jerusalem provides an example for the potential for bi-lateral and regional initiatives for joint rights-based ventures. The rights-based approach enabled the centers to transcend the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to work together to secure greater access to rights and entitlements. Joint ventures led to the production of a film documenting the work of each of the centers, the common conceptual framework and parallel efforts to promote peace in the Middle East. The framework for the film was determined through the cooperation of the center directors. In February 2006, the first regional conference of the McGill Middle East Program was held in Istanbul, Turkey. The conference brought together one hundred community volunteers, staff, and members of the board of directors from the five centers for a three day-program focused on rights-based practice. For many of the participants the conference provided a first-ever opportunity to meet “the other.” The conference was a first in that it not only brought together professionals, but constituents of the practice centers—individuals from some of the most disadvantaged communities of each of the societies—as well. In small dialogue groups, through panel discussions and the film produced by the centers, during meals and while touring the sites of Istanbul, conference participants maximized the opportunity to
begin to know one another and explore the commonalities that the link to the practice centers provide. The overwhelming feedback at the conclusion of the three-day conference was that it was simply too short. Finally, the regional network has defined common research goals already underway to identify the impact of the practice centers on disadvantaged communities, on social policy change, and on peace building within each of the respective societies. These initiatives are still in their early stages, yet their success has created hope and the potential for future peace building efforts.

**Learning from Success**

Creating conditions that foster the development of peaceful communities within and between societies is an enormous task, and one that requires envisioning a different future and organizing to make it a reality. Creating a future that is based upon greater equality necessitates no less than the transformation of social relations. The experience of the McGill Middle East Program in Civil Society and Peace Building demonstrates that the professional community, when engaged in relationship building promoted through a common regard for human rights and in particular social rights, can contribute to the transformation of social relations. Moreover, such interdisciplinary professional engagement can be applied in diverse contexts to advance greater equality and peace within and among societies in conflict. Inter-communal conflicts around the world are on the rise (Witte, 1996). Given the current achievements of the program, it seems appropriate to suggest that the professional community, and in particular social work, has a role to play in addressing the transformation of social relations within these conflicts.

The success of the McGill Program in Civil Society and Peace Building can be attributed to a number of factors. First, the program has the ability to simultaneously ensure the autonomy of each of the centers within its particular social, economic, and political context, and at the same time to form bridges that create common links between them. This means that the MMEP recognizes that while the practice centers share a common ideology, they develop in accordance with the particular context within which they are situated. Second, the program has the ability to start where the community is and together with the community to construct meaningful discourse that shapes reciprocal relationships. This means that there is a recognition and understanding of the unique cultures of the particular community. Third, the program is committed to notions of empowerment and institutional capacity-building. The
community is a decision-making partner in the development and implementation of the practice approach. Fourth, the practice approach is interdisciplinary in inviting in appropriate professionals in relation to the rights issues at hand. Finally, the program recognizes that the sustainability of the program requires partnerships with academic institutions and community organizations in order to provide on-going support to the practice centers.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY SOCIAL WORK AND TRAINING**

Social work training programs can prepare social work students to address the reduction of inequality and the promotion of peace building. To do so would require that schools of social work recognize that a peace building agenda is inherent in the values and goals of the profession inasmuch as the reduction of inequality and the building of relationships are integral to social work practice. As such social workers would be engaged in a proactive approach to peace building as opposed to being trained to treat the victims of war. Historically, little attention has been paid to the profession’s role in advancing peace (Williams, 1987). For example, Jane Addams, most prominent in the pages of social work history in her role as founder of Hull House in Chicago, is less well known for her role in promoting world peace and as the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Although the 1980’s marked a period of heightened professional concern with matters of war and peace, the literature reveals that the profession was primarily engrossed in the psychological, social and economic effects of war, and less engaged in advancing a conceptual framework to inform a social work approach to positive peace (Gil, 1989; Hashimi, 1985). A proposal for positive peace emerges to some degree in the 1990’s as Sullivan (1993) argues to unify concepts of peace with the profession’s commitment to social justice and the elimination of oppression. Yet, Sullivan’s discourse is an anomaly. In the last five years, there appears to be somewhat of an awakening as Torczyner (2000) and Moshe (2001) define the role of the profession in peace building.

To train community social workers to promote positive peace would require an approach that envisions social workers as transformers of social relations and organizers capable of implementing transformation (Freire, 1990). This means that social work education would be less concerned with its focus on medical and psychological models and
more focused on historical, political, social, economic, legal and cultural knowledge. Community social workers, trained to engage in the promotion of positive peace, would spend less time learning therapeutic techniques and more time learning about power relationships, empowerment, oppression, and the impact of poverty and inequality on individuals and communities. These would then be operationalized in anti-oppressive, community-based interventions. Training community social workers to be peace builders would require knowledge in interdisciplinary collaboration, partnership building, institutional capacity-building and fundraising. Finally, field placements relevant to peace building would, for the most part, be outside of the scope of government-based social services. Instead students would need to be exposed to non-government organizations coping with issues of inequality and conflict. To revise the agenda of social work schools to promote a peace building approach seems to be more of a conceptual question than anything else. Courses such as those mentioned above exist in schools of social work, yet lack a broad conceptual framework to link them to peace. Perhaps the success of one such program as implemented in the Middle East will encourage the necessary dialogue to promote such a conceptual jump in other regions around the world.

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