

**Presentation of Crossing Borders
for learning to live together on equal terms
By Garba Diallo, Denmark**

Crossing Borders

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**Crossing Borders
Montebello Alle 1
3000 Elsinore, Denmark
Tel +45 492123371
Cell +45 21639432
Fax +45 49212128
Email: garba@crossingborder.org
Homepage: www.crossingborder.org**



Firstly, I want to thank the convenors of this conference for the opportunity to attend and to share with you some of my direct experiences in conducting intercultural dialogue programmes among Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs and Palestinian youth and educators. I will do this in the context of the Rabat “Commitment on Dialogue among Cultures.” The vehicle for our work in the region is called Crossing Borders.

Crossing Borders is a non-government organisation based at the International People’s College (IPC) in Elsinore, Denmark with branches in Palestine, Israel and Jordan. IPC was founded in 1921 in the aftermath of WWI to promote international understanding and world peace. It hosted the first UNESCO conference on adult education in 1949, the pre and post Hamburg UNESCO meetings in 1997.

Crossing Borders provides a neutral space where youth and educators can acquire the kind of skills that foster more effective participation in the process towards peaceful coexistence in their region. Our main activities comprise training in conflict management, intercultural communication and media skills, team building and narrative and identity analysis. A concrete output of our programme is the publication and distribution of the bi-monthly Crossing Borders magazine produced by and for Arab and Israeli youth.

The methods and principles of Crossing Borders are based on ongoing dialogue, equal participation, shared ownership and concrete and joint outputs. It is within these boundaries that learning elements are provided that are of both immediate and long term benefit to the participants and their communities.



The need for dialogue across borders

The need to apply the concept of cross-border dialogue, mutual learning and non-violent communication has become more urgent today than ever before. This is in spite of the pervasiveness of electronic communications, and the greater freedom of movement for peoples around the globe.

Giving young people relevant training and civic education opportunities enables them to participate confidently in the processes that affect their present lives and future opportunities as adult members and leaders of society.

The primary target groups of Crossing Borders are youth aged 16-25 years, and teachers from the societies in conflict. The criteria for selection of the participants is based on a declared interest in developing conflict management, communication, media and conflict sensitive journalism skills together with fellow youth from the “other” sides. The target educators comprise language and humanities high school teachers who are interested in developing a more effective and cooperative intercultural, media and conflict management pedagogy together with colleagues across the divide.

Our programmes take place outside the conflict region, generally in Denmark but also in Turkey and Berlin. Our youth programme now includes German and Danish youth and we have found this to have a profound benefit for all participating parties. Put simply, the Europeans can ask the hard questions and their presence tempers any tendency to lapse into stereotyping of the other side. In so doing, young Danes and Germans are gaining vital insights



into their neighbouring region and a greater understanding of their potential to support the peace process.

Generally our workshop programmes last two weeks for the youth and about a week for the educators. We aim to provide at least three youth workshops and two educator workshops per year. Access to funding is a strong but not final determinant of how many workshops we can run.

Methods

I need at this stage to say a little more about our methods and why we use them.

A deep fear of the stranger is a root cause of conflict. It is therefore vital for people to meet face to face, interact, demystify and discover the human nature of one another. The danger of a narrow perspective that builds on “us or them”, rather than “us and them, together”, can be mitigated and challenged through face to face meeting, interacting, learning to live with and accept the necessity and beauty of cultural diversity: once “the other” gets a face like our own, there is less cause for anxiety and fear of that other. Xenophobia is often created and sustained by misinformation, lack of direct contact and positive experience, ignorance and harmful generalisations.

The guiding method of Crossing Borders is based on mutual learning and respect, open dialogue and equal participation among the project stakeholders. Participation means that the project partners in Israel,



Palestine and Jordan are included in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of all Crossing Borders activities.

While it is one thing to provide skills training in the areas I have already mentioned, there is a clear need to have something concrete to show for your effort. For the youth, there is the Crossing Borders magazine which comes out every second month. In its 28 edition, the magazine is distributed to schools and other organisations and institutions in the region. Right now we are distributing about 10,000 copies of each edition. For the teachers, their efforts have culminated in the recent publication of a Teachers' Manual that provides background and lesson plans for approaching issues of conflict, peace and coexistence.

Learning on Equal Terms

What I have just now provided is the briefest of summaries of our work practices. To date, more than 400 hundred youth and around 200 educators have participated in our programmes. In most cases we work with the same youth and educators for more than one workshop to ensure that the benefits of their first encounters with the other side are reinforced over time. We believe we now have concrete evidence that our methods and programmes are succeeding but I will save that evidence for my concluding remarks.

Right now, I want to examine the issues embedded in the notion of “learning together on equal terms”. You can readily imagine how difficult it can be to achieve “equal terms” under the conditions currently prevailing among



Israelis and Palestinians. We have achieved our equal terms by ensuring that we have active local partners representing the key groups in the Crossing Borders programme. Those partners work with their respective youth and educators, participate in all decision-making regarding the programmes and, where the youth are concerned, rotate the editorship of the Crossing Borders magazine among them. By doing this we have ensured that all parties feel adequately represented, get their needs and issues considered and that no party has a dominant say in what happens. Of course, we have had, from time to time, to refuse funding from parties who have been aligned with one or other side of the conflict. Equal terms means we all prosper or go hungry together.

An example of this negotiated equality can be seen in the numbers of each participating group. In order to ensure that the Israeli Jews are not completely outnumbered by their neighbouring groups of Arabs and Palestinians, the partners agreed that at the workshops, there would generally be 12 Israeli Jews, 10 Palestinians, 8 Jordanians, and 6 Arabs in Israel. You can do the maths if you wish, but this mix works and ensures that the concept of “equal terms” is visible on the ground.

The sense of equal participation is helped by Crossing Borders being based in Denmark, which, for most of its recent history has been a benign contributor to a better world. In the words of the Hitch-hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, Denmark is “Mostly Harmless” and most importantly, is seen to be so by the parties in the conflict zone.

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The equality is helped by me being a Mauritanian. I represent no dominant discourse. And our workshop facilitators and assistants are equally diverse, comprising over the six years of our existence, Danes, Germans, a Turk, a Greek, a Finn, and Englishman, an Australian and Japanese. The magazine is printed either at Al Resala Press, Beit Hanina or Orientation (Israeli) Press in Jerusalem.

So much for the structure underpinning our learning on equal terms. Now I want to consider the workshop practices which foster equal learning on the front line. Firstly, all parties have the right to speak and the duty to listen. This is one of the core skills we train our participants in. Both the youth and educators are often beset by passionate concerns about the effect of the conflict on their own people. We find that our open dialogue approach, mediated by me with support from one or more of my team, allows people to blow off their angst, their pain and often-times, their ignorance, and gives space for new attitude alignments to arise.

I will give you an example. At one of our youth workshops in Turkey, a young novice Crossing Borders participant, a Christian Arab, stood up and asked “why don’t the Jews admit they murdered Jesus.” We were all together in the meeting room and this highly confrontational and provocative question landed like a 5 ton camel in our midst. The Christian Arab had recently seen Mel Gibson’s film, “The Passion of Christ” and was clearly speaking from her faith and not her brain. In responding to her, a young Jewish guy, one who had already been at a couple of Crossing Borders seminars, calmly stood up and very quietly responded, not to the issue of the question but to the feeling underlying it. He spoke of the feelings the Jews carry with them built up over

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centuries of persecution and hate and concluded by telling the questioner simply that it was very difficult and painful to hear such a question. In his calm way, he led the group, which was trembling with high emotion, back into calmer waters and promoted a spirit of reflection on the issues.

The open dialogue approach often leads us into stressful encounters and it is gratifying to see that our approach rubs off on the participants and equips them to deal better with highly provocative situations.

Learning on equal terms succeeds also because of the cooperative nature of the outputs from both the youth and the educator workshops. Many of the articles in the Crossing Borders magazine are joint articles written by two or more parties to the conflict working together to produce their story. Similarly, in our Team Building processes, we run a strict line with the youth. We tell them that in life, you rarely get to choose your team mates, whether it is football we're talking about or work or study. So we throw them together in groups of our own devising and charge them to examine and explore their team's qualities and skills and bring out the best in each other. It is truly amazing what they can achieve. And the most gratifying thing of all is how surprised and happy they are when they discover that they can work effectively with people from the other side. Similarly, with the educators, the Teachers' Manual required the joint efforts of all parties to bring it to fruition. Some participants tend to be better resourced and thus better organised than the others but with the manual, there was a clear recognition that its success depended on it being a truly joint program.



Concluding remarks

Ladies and gentlemen, I will conclude with what I believe is evidence of Crossing Borders success on the ground. Right now, as I speak to you, there are small groups of Israeli Jews, Arabs and Palestinians, meeting together in various parts of the region to set up and run Crossing Borders youth clubs. They are, in short, aiming to recreate the neutral space that so enriched their lives when they were together at Crossing Borders seminars. Furthermore, this idea came from the youth, not from the adult supervisors. They saw the need, they saw the potential, we helped them build project teams to flesh out their ideas and they put it all together. And now it is happening and I have been invited to attend the opening of the first Crossing Borders youth club in Haifa on October 2. The opening is planned to coincide with the 6th Anniversary celebration of Crossing Borders to be held on October 1 at the Willy Brandt Centre for Encounters and Communication at Abu Tor, Jerusalem. And of course, these youngsters didn't wait for funding applications or any of that stuff. No they put their own funds into it to make a strong start. With proper funding they will hopefully be able to make a strong finish as well.

In our funding applications, we always write that our core objective is for the youth and educators to bring their newfound skills back to their communities and begin to practice what they have learned. I can tell you that it is highly gratifying to see it happening, to experience the energy, the creativity and the commitment of these young people right now to create something of value in this troubled part of the world.

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They feel empowered to act because they have seen for themselves that with openness, patience and a commitment to ongoing dialogue. They can not only learn together on equal terms, but also act together on equal terms to build a better future for themselves, their communities and indeed, for the whole region, if not the whole world.

Thank you. I have some copies of the Crossing Borders magazine, Teachers Manual, pilot documentary DVD and more detailed description of our activities, methodologies and structure for those who would like to know more.

Thank you for your attention