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DIALOGUE AS A MEANS FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION, MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION: A LEBANESE CASE STUDY

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In a democratic society conflict is the basis for social change. And in any diversified community with different interests, social interaction will not be entirely without conflict. And as conflicts relate to unequal or inadequate distribution or availability of resources, the community, then, is part of the solution.

So … **"*The problem is not conflict, but the way we choose to deal with conflict.*"**

No one said conflict management or resolution was ever easy. But difficulty is not a reason for passivity or paralysis. Let us therefore reflect a little about what was done here in an attempt to promote inter-cultural harmony and peace and build communities in situations where there are tensions or communal conflicts. The response to such conflicts can be explored both in short-term and long-term perspectives, and here comes the fundamental role of "education" in promoting interpersonal cooperation and understanding and reinforcing social cohesion.

Yet, the educational system can contribute to exacerbating and escalating societal conflicts in particular when it (re)produces socio-economic disparities and brings about social marginalization or compartmentation, or promotes the teaching of identity and citizenship concepts in a way that denies the cultural plurality of society and which then leads to intolerance towards "the other". Then, Education would be a key medium with which ethnicity is mobilized for the escalation of conflicts.

Since its establishment in 1960, Beirut Arab University has believed in equal opportunities and in the role good citizens should play to develop the community. The mission of the university is to offer excellence in education, learning, and research whilst meeting the needs of our community and adhering to our academic values of intellectual freedom, integrity and professionalism.

Beirut Arab University believes in Social Responsibility as a moral and ethical principle that guides the actions of universities. And in times of unrest, university actions should not be limited to the exclusive tasks of teaching and researching. Furthermore, Beirut Arab University believes it should have a wider and inclusive nature that reflects its high commitment to the social reality as well as to the complex vocation of building peace and reconciliation.

We decided to enlarge our level of actions and interactions with our social sphere in an attempt to create a liberal tolerant atmosphere where students would be spared any negative influences. The credit system enabled us to introduce a wide selection of general knowledge courses that were not intended only to enrich the intellectual life of our students, but more importantly enabled students to meet with their colleagues from other faculties or departments at the university. The mere fact that an engineering student would be discussing his course material with an Arts student enriched the discussions in all the

university elective courses. Upon assessing those courses, we noticed that the scope of dialogue between our students widened and reached a higher spectrum.

Based on the experience gained from the university elective courses, and since the philosophy of Beirut Arab University has been and will continue to be building peace and enhancing dialogue through different types of actions, we decided to enlarge the scope of dialogue at the university and direct it towards human rights issues by providing our students with a platform for open discussions.

Thus, our curriculum was complemented by adding a mandatory course on human rights for all our students of all disciplines. Students in this course are given the opportunity to discuss basic principles related to dignity, equality, freedom, respecting others, tolerance, responsibility, non-discrimination and justice. They learn about the tension between freedom and responsibility and how the universality of human rights functions in relation to cultural specificities. They are also introduced to what citizenship has meant over the years and what it takes to be a good citizen. Another issue the course addresses is how democracy functions, what it achieves for the people and what are some of the problems it might face. Our students are also introduced to topics related to the rights and needs of children, gender equality and education.

I am proud to say that over 5000 students had so far the chance to enroll in this course and to learn more about the basic foundations of dialogue especially freedom of thought and expression, tolerance and respect for the opinions of others.

A thorough internal assessment of this phase revealed positive results and this inspired us to move forward. The concentration was on how to provide for

additional platforms of dialogue between our students and the community. As an experiment, we co-organized with a Lebanese NGO a human rights activity named "Differences without Conflicts". This activity provided the participants with a space for dialogue and the exchange of thoughts on various issues. This six-day activity engaged over 50 students from all the faculties of the university and took place at our Beirut and Debbieh campuses. It adopted a non-formal teaching method and aimed at highlighting the fact that differences could be managed through dialogue and should not necessarily cause conflicts.

At the end of this activity, our students recognized the necessity of seeking and highlighting what unites rather than what divides. Thus, they focused on environmental issues, as a matter that relates to all individuals regardless of any differences of any type or form. They emphasized the role the university should play in promoting environmental awareness. The students prepared and signed a Student Declaration in which they confirmed the values of human rights and expressed their interest in unity and achieving common goals towards the creation of a healthy environment for all. They also took action pertaining to implementing the declaration through creating a paper recycling system at the university.

This experience proved that by providing a platform for dialogue, students of different beliefs and opinions were able to find and reach common grounds for a more civilized life.

At all times we were aware that such individual activities would not solve the problem of lack of dialogue. Thus there was a need to bring all the efforts together and coordinate them in order to maximize the benefit. Based on the experiences described above, we went along with establishing a human rights center.

The Human Rights Center at Beirut Arab University is one of a few centers, if not the first of its kind to be established at an educational institution in Lebanon and the region. It aims at spreading the culture of human rights and dialogue; and also introducing the values of human rights at the university and there from in the society.

The Human Rights Center organizes numerous activities, including:

- Workshops and training programs on human rights and human rights education.
- Moot court competitions.
- Summer schools in collaboration with other universities and national and international institutes.
- Issuing publications and reports on various aspects of human rights.

The Human Rights Center at Beirut Arab University serves, through its activities, as a platform for dialogue among our students and graduates. The activities that we conduct with institutions and NGOs from Lebanon and abroad enable our students to interact and exchange ideas and conceptions with other persons from different societies with different cultures and beliefs.

Ever since its establishment in 2008, the Human Rights Center organized two activities. Together with the American Bar Association, it organized a moot court competition in which our students debated a case on the freedom of press and expression. We are looking forward to developing this experience further and to organizing such competitions together with other universities on the national and regional levels.

Yet our major activity has been the Euro-Mediterranean Training Course on Human Rights Education with Young People. The course was organized with

the Council of Europe and in collaboration with two Lebanese NGOs. This course was attended by 25 participants from 13 countries and was conducted by 5 trainers from four countries. All the participants were members of NGOs in their states. In addition to the organization and hosting of the event, the Human Rights Center participated through its volunteers in this training course.

Ladies and gentlemen, the organization phase by itself was a very interesting dialogue between cultures.

It gives me great pleasure to inform you that ever since we applied the above mentioned actions and measures, we have noticed a change in the tendency of our students. They have become more open to diversities of all kinds.

Thus, enhancing dialogue at our university by complementing the curriculum with a mandatory course on human rights, creating a more tolerant educational environment, encouraging students to be involved in dialogue-favorable-activities, and establishing the Human Rights Center at Beirut Arab University has clearly caused a positive change to our university environment and has led to preventing, managing and resolving conflicts in our small community. This is a case study that we are proud of and we believe it may be applied on a larger scale for the benefit of the whole society.

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Abstract

Conflict is inevitable; the problem is the way we choose to deal with it.

The educational system can contribute to exacerbating and escalating societal conflicts or decide to play a positive role in this respect.
Beirut Arab University believes in Social Responsibility as a moral and ethical principle that guides the actions of universities. This may be achieved through encouraging dialogue among the students. Hence we took a number of measures aiming at achieving our goals.