

The Society Should also be Politically Inclusive

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At a workshop organized by The Youth Association of the Blind (YAB) and The Lebanese Physically Handicapped Union (LPHU) from July 13-15, participants examined strategies for advocating an inclusive society for all in which all the citizens have all their rights, even their political ones.

Representatives from Yemen, Jordan and Egypt attended the workshop and worked with speakers from YAB, LPHU, The Lebanese Association for the Democracy of Election (LADE), and *Al-Nahar* Newspaper to discuss the Lebanese experience in the “*Haqqi*” or “My Right” campaign, a project organized by YAB and LPHU to make the issues of the disabled visible through the election.

The “My Right” campaign worked with those calling for the rights of the disabled and was very successful. The campaign used Lebanon’s 2005 parliamentary elections as a platform for advocacy. At the regional workshop ideas were exchanged about the strategies used in “My Right” campaign and the participating countries were able to develop plans to carry out similar projects.

Nizar Ibrahim, the manager of the project, explained the goals and policies of “My Right”. He emphasized that YAB and LPHU work for an inclusive society in which marginalization should decrease and in which all the citizens, including those with special needs, have their rights at all levels. The recent elections constituted an important platform for bringing up the issue of the marginalization of people with special needs and for promoting advocacy for their rights at the vocational, educational, and social levels.

The workshop participants discussed the importance of political work in raising the issues of people with special needs, which was at the heart of “My Right” campaign. People with special needs (and all the other social groups,

especially the marginalized ones) must be educated regarding the election process. They must also examine the willingness and seriousness of the election candidates to work for giving the marginalized their rights and developing policies that improve their lives.

Hussam Addanaf, coordinator of “My Right” for the Beirut region, explained that one of the campaign’s purposes was to promote such awareness and that to achieve this, “My Right” networked with other associations to address the disabled. The campaign brochure also explained the importance of being politically involved and the specific mechanisms that facilitate this involvement for people with special needs.

The regional “My Right” workshop discussed strategies for working with the media in two different sessions which were conducted by Iman Khaleefeh from LPHU and Ghassan Hajjar from *Al-Nahar* newspaper. Both emphasized the strategies that should be followed by NGOs to involve the media. They stressed the importance of NGOs assigning one person the responsibility of liaising with the media. Knowing whom to contact in each media company, what information to provide about the subject, and how to attract the attention of the person addressed help build a successful relationship with the media.

The regional workshop concluded that “My Right” succeeded in attracting the attention of the media because the campaign formulated a clear message, appointed a person whose responsibility it was to follow up with the media, raised the issues of people with special needs in a concrete way, and made their concerns a hot issue.

The workshop also discussed the importance of establishing a relationship with the political parties in doing advocacy work. Amer Makarem, the President of YAB, con-



ducted this discussion maintaining that working with the political parties assists marginalized groups to form a lobbying power. Waleed Fakherdeen, an activist in LADE, in his discussion of the Lebanese political situation illustrated the need of the marginalized groups to cooperate with the different political parties. The process of creating partners with political groups is a long one and needs commitment, patience and a clear vision. Commitment can start when the NGO assigns one person or a team the responsibility of working with the political groups. This team's work should be based on a clear policy and should have specific demands with which the politicians can empathize, and specific steps to work for these demands.

For example, one of the strategies used in "My Right" campaign was to show the difficulties that people with special needs face during the election through preparing model polling stations and drafting legal articles to solve these problems. The campaign then advocated with different groups to include these articles in the new election law.

It is important too to maintain a distance between your association and the different political groups to establish the credibility of the association as an independent rights movement and not as a politically affiliated one. A clear policy and a clear vision constitute the basis for



good cooperation with other NGOs. The cooperation on many fronts of "My Right" campaign with the Lebanese Association for the Democracy of Election (LADE) illustrates this. Ammar Abbood, the person in charge of training in LADE, stated that although cooperation existed between YAB and LPHU on one side and LADE on another side before the campaign, "My Right" campaign gave this cooperation a strong push. This came about through several steps:

- a. Explaining to LADE the purpose and policy of "My Right" campaign.
- b. Preparing training manuals for the observers and the media that specify what to look for when observing and reporting about the participation of people with special needs in the elections.
- c. Providing LADE with material like the inclusive criteria, the existing law, and the suggested legal articles that deal with the participation of those with special needs in the elections.
- d. Asking LADE for cooperation in specific areas: including the criteria of "My Right" campaign in training the observers and media; including the violations of the rights of people with special needs during the election in LADE's

reports.

The strategies used with LADE proved to be successful and can be followed by other NGOs in advocacy campaigns. Ammar Abbood said the impact of cooperating with LADE became clear where the trained observers themselves became aware of the rights of people with special needs to the extent that they included the concerns of this marginalized group regularly in their election reports.

The participants in the regional workshop of "My Right" campaign were highly interactive in raising their concerns. Their questions enriched the discussions in the workshop and made the topics discussed highly beneficial. They expressed their appreciation of what was discussed, highlighting the importance of the model polling stations organized by "My Right" campaign, as discussed by Husain Mruwweh, the project's Nabatiyeh coordinator. The outcome of the workshop was tentative plans for carrying out similar projects in the participating countries. The Lebanese pilot experience laid the grounds for similar experiences in the Middle East.