

كافرانبل

22-05-2013

My Name is Kafranbel, and I Don't need Trainings in Needs Assessment

My Name is Kafranbel, and I Don't need Trainings in Needs Assessment

Nayla Mansour



In May 2013, [Nayla Mansour](#) wrote this article as a testimony on the NGOs work in Syria. Many things have changed in the Syrian scene since then, but probably to a lesser degree when it comes to the NGOs work. Mansour pinpoints some of the important issues

preventing an effective response in Syria: the NGOs' tradition of non-involvement in political affairs and the lack of tailored models for the Syrian crisis. By translating and republishing this article, we hope to encourage writing more testimonies and critiques of the **NGOs work** in Syria, which may eventually lead to more effective practices and strategies.

An eight-year child approaches one of the supervisors at the Centre for Alternative Education in Damascus Suburb, who is busy photocopying some papers, and tells her out of the blue: «Guess what? When we took to the streets we wanted Bashar al-Assad to die but it didn't work out... it is now better if we die ourselves, so we go to paradise and get rid of him».

On that very same morning, the same supervisor received an email from a non-governmental organization (NGO) working in the field of child support in times of conflict and disaster, urging her to seek assistance and offering a wide variety of trainings for volunteers. Among the offered trainings is a course to qualify those who work with children to perform needs assessment. The «needs» here means those of the child at times of war.

The supervisor thought, what can she reply to this email? She can communicate the child's needs directly, as is, without rephrasing; Jonnie needs the fastest way to die only if guaranteed to end up in paradise. Then she thought, since the organization is offering trainings in needs assessment, this must mean that her initial assessment is immature, and it takes training to better understand the language until one reaches the deeper meaning of the child's words. The «best» part is that the same organization requires those working with children to create a child

protection policy in the centres where they work... Yes! A child protection policy in areas that are mostly exposed to all kinds of violations, rockets and missiles, at least aerial ones. This child protection policy is not established by representatives of the «State» notwithstanding, the activists and volunteers have to establish a policy that includes provisions and measures to protect children from life-threatening risks.

One may say that because this European organization fails to imagine the irrationality of the Syrian regime, it assumes that the Syrian regime has a slightly tougher version of the rationality of the Dutch, French or British governments.

This is not the problem, away from the sterile irony we use in the face of the horrors we are living in this area of the planet, we must pause and ponder the role played by NGOs currently operating in Syria. What's more, we must wonder about its role from a purely humanitarian standpoint. What I will say does not aspire to reiterate the well-known theoretical critique of the NGOs work, this is simply a fresh testimony in the Syrian context, a testimony of newcomers to the world of NGOs and donors for civic activism. We believe that documenting testimonies in an honest and simple language is an important cornerstone of any noble work.

The obscure yet obvious-to-everyone problem is that all regions in Syria, with a few exceptions, have become bottomless holes of humanitarian aid. Familial and local donations are no longer sufficient to face the mass destruction in various infrastructures. In addition, with the revolution lasting for more than two years the article was written in May 2013, the local communities that were

donating are now impoverished after they have lost their jobs in most cases. Facing such disaster, the revolutionary youth working in humanitarian relief had no choice but to consider cooperation with donor organizations a valuable opportunity that they must seize without hesitation to contribute to fulfilling a small fraction of the appalling needs.

To secure funding, the activist groups –first and foremost– struggle with the initial requirements of the donor. The organizational structures, processes, advance planning, strict contractual items, high-quality standards (often not adapted to the local context and the unstable security situation), all of these things give the impression that war and conflict are inevitable human destinies, not an emergency case calling for indignation, condemnation and spontaneous actions to stop the killing. Organization is the opposite of spontaneity; it is cold-bloodedness by definition. Organization calls for working and monitoring mechanisms and non-stop data collection. But what is the meaning of such mechanisms in the face of explosive barrels and Scud missiles? What is the meaning of the diverse range of trainings on the art of citizenship, if half of the trainee's countrymen will die before completing the training session? This literally means regulating one's death, making it subject to a regulatory mechanism; deep down it means rationalizing, and thus normalizing, the current situation. It is rationalizing death, in a nutshell. As for indignation and condemnation, they still fall under the name of emergency and abnormality, which is what definitely suits our extraordinary life. All of that assuming that the donor has honest and upfront funding sources, and doesn't have hidden agendas behind its requirements for data collection, as some activists indicated sometimes.

Needless to say, the person who first contact the donor usually has the communication tools and skills, speak foreign languages, readily adapts to the mechanisms, practices and concepts used by Western organizations, and will serve as an intermediary between the donors and local communities. Because the local communities don't necessarily have the tools to communicate with the donor, it often becomes consolidated in these communities (the beneficiaries in theory) that the intermediary is indispensable, to the extent that the intermediary and the donor blend in their minds. The core of the issue is not that NGOs evaluate, without being subject to mutual evaluation, the work of civic relief groups and base the continuation of funding on their performance, but that the social strata directly benefiting of their work will never think of evaluating the donors themselves. In any case, no one will ask for their evaluation, they can only receive the benefits with gratitude and obedience given the surrounding destruction and lack of anything to do with humanity.

The activist is busy working in response to the mechanisms and frameworks of the donor organization; a full-time job that not only distracts him from all the basic political demands for which the people rose, but also creates a bizarre delusion of stability (of course everything is relative with the shells and Scud missiles), a stability on the margin of devastation and on the level of personal life. This delusion makes him fly away with his desire for change, development and relief, and sometimes makes him forget that the death scythe is still harvesting lives, and that civic actions remain of limited impact in such circumstances. In this sense, the saying "money corrupts" gains a deep meaning, deeper than just direct corruption and embezzlement. Money corrupts in the sense that it creates

new, more relaxed conditions and information for civic work, but less authentic on the long run; it reproduces the details according to international models, and not always corresponding to the direct need of people. One of the most important food relief workers in Damascus told me that one of the organizations was using a standardized model for food baskets that includes 10 kg of rice per month per family. He kept wondering “why” for months, until he understood that this model was universally applied after the 2005 tsunami in Asia. At any rate, the shift of basic food from bread to rice is not the worst thing Syrians have been through.

What should we do? Can anyone with a bit of rationality reject funding, any funding to relieve Syrians, even a little bit? No.

Aside from preaching about the need to value the nobility of work without blindly obeying the dictates of organizations, and the need to involve the beneficiaries in the perception of civic work designed for their benefit and the need for multilateral evaluation of organizations; away from it all, we want to ask about an intuitive issue which no one seems to doubt: why cannot all the innumerable organizations, associations and entities do any political action to condemn the killing? My words may seem very naive or childish, but they are valid.

If one of the definitions of democracy is holding the society accountable in front of the individual, and vice versa, then this concept also extends to the relationship between the individual and the international community. The Syrian Revolution highlighted the need to recast the relationship between the individual and the international community.

Kafranbel, it seems, understood the equation in the best way possible. It addresses the international community on behalf of the Syrian individual, faces it with the truth, and says: Stop the killing before you organizing trainings in the art of citizenship and needs assessment.

Kafranbel does not need trainings in needs assessment, it needs its painters and youth who speak foreign languages; it needs their group photos with some of Idlib's olive trees in the background.