

The COME Foundation

February 2011

1. Introduction

This document describes the vision, including its objective and method, of COME Foundation (Communication Middle East). This document is limited to a discussion of the facilitation and organization of seminars for Palestinian and Israeli youth by the COME Foundation. Since its founding in 1975, this Dutch foundation has also organized other activities, such as seminars and trips for Dutch people who want to explore the Middle East conflict generally, and the Israeli-Palestinian issue specifically. Because of financial constraints, the Foundation is since late 2009 only concerned with facilitating and organizing the acquaintance seminars.

The Dutch board of COME Foundation guarantees the continuity of the organization of the seminars and raises financial resources for this. In addition, the foundation has a committee consisting of two Dutch members (the project leader and a companion) and a number of Israeli and Palestinian members. These 'local' committee members are former seminar participants and they change every few years. The committee is jointly responsible for preparing and implementing the program and for recruiting, selecting and preparation of the participants. Participants are drawn from groups: Jewish Israelis, '67 Palestinians (Palestinians living in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel in 1967) and '48 Palestinians (Palestinians living in Israel). In general, two committee members accompany each group during the seminar.

This document consists of four parts:

1. Introduction
2. Objectives
3. Achieving the objectives and sub-objectives
4. Method

2. Objectives

Main objective

Organizing acquaintance seminars on neutral ground in which Israeli and Palestinian youth (both living in Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territories) can meet each other, in the context of the conflict situation in the Middle East.

Sub objectives

With the organization of these seminars, we hope to give Israeli and Palestinian youth six opportunities, which can be seen as the six sub objectives of the Foundation COME. We want to give them:

1. the opportunity to meet, which in daily life is difficult and not always possible;
2. the opportunity to express what people are really concerned about or their concerns;
3. the opportunity to experience and see the human side of the conflict and to look differently at the other and at the situation;
4. the opportunity to understand the interests, impact and motives of the other;
5. the opportunity for self-examination. This may include:
 - a. reflection on one's own identity and on the images one has about the other,
 - b. reviewing one's own ideas and experiences in comparison to perceptions of others,
 - c. confrontation with one's own identity,
 - d. investigation into one's own identity in relation to the other and in relation to others within one's own group (pluralism of one's own group),
 - e. exploring one's own and others' responsibility and victimization.
6. We believe and are convinced that this experience contributes to the broadening of perspectives, which can be applied in daily life.

Explanation of the main objective and sub objectives

With these seminars, we want to offer Palestinian and Israeli youth various opportunities. This means that participants are not obliged to pass through a certain development during the seminar, that we are not working towards a specific goal, and that individuals can benefit from these opportunities in their own way. Due to our clarity about the sub-goals, we expect that participants will not feel compelled, but feel invited to be themselves and to flourish and develop within their own abilities and desires. We believe this promotes the inner motivation and commitment of the participants.

These seminars offer Palestinian and Israeli youth the opportunity to meet in a neutral context, outside Israel and the Palestinian territories. This context offers them the opportunity to distance themselves from everyday life in Israel and the Palestinian territories. In this way, we try to let the participants meet each other on an equal basis.

The Middle Eastern context is often characterized by polarization, or us-them thinking, namely classifying people into categories and stereotypes. By explicitly taking time, attention and distance to meet each other in a neutral and open context, we offer Israeli and Palestinian youth the possibility to see the human side in each other. This includes enabling them to gain more insight into the motivations and perceptions of 'the other', and into the impact that their own actions and speech can have on 'the other'. We do not force the youth to give up old polarized images, but we give them the opportunity to review their own images in comparison to the experience of others, and to place possibly new, more realistic, nuanced or human images alongside the old images.

The seminar offers participants the opportunity for self-examination. In the meetings, conversations, social activities and discussions with other participants, one encounters other ideas, narratives and experiences. One may be faced with one's own identity and research one's identity in relation to the other and in relation to others within one's own group. Precisely because the seminar takes place on neutral ground, away from everyday life in Israel and Palestine, this context gives the participants an opportunity for self-examination.

We believe that the seminars do not remain a single encounter and experience for the participants. The experiences they gain may help them to broaden, renew or change their overall perspective and attitude towards the conflict and towards themselves. We are confident that participants in their daily lives will apply this broadening, renewal and/or change, explicitly or implicitly. Each participant has the freedom to do this in his or her own way.

3. Achieving the objectives and sub-objectives

The objective and sub-objectives, as outlined above, can only be achieved if the seminars meet a number of conditions. In consultation with the Dutch project leader, the local committee members prepare the participants for what to expect during the seminar. The Dutch facilitators make sure these conditions are met during the seminar:

- Openness: to express yourself the way you want
- Mutual respect
- Willingness to listen to the other
- Equality
- Easy accessibility
- Not pretentious
- Recognition of discrepancy and pain may be present
- No hidden agendas
- Not used in order to make a good impression
- No formal organizational structure
- As diverse and as random possible group of participants
- Selection of participants from their own networks
- Not from an external motivation, but rather through the local committee members internal motivation for participation is created
- No obligations after the seminar
- Willingness to participate in all parts of the seminar

Explanation of the terms of the objectives

It is important that participants feel that they can be themselves and that they can express what concerns them, naturally within the boundaries of reason and respect for the other. The experience and opinion of each participant is considered equal, even if someone has a personal experience or opinion that differs from that of other participants.

Participants are not obliged to go through a certain individual development during the seminar. Nevertheless, in principle they have to be willing to participate in all activities, within reasonable limits. They are encouraged to be actively involved and actively contribute to the seminar.

There are no other objectives than those described above, which apply to both the Dutch facilitators, the Israeli and Palestinian committee members, and to the participants. This also means that nobody participates to strengthen one's own name or to create a good impression of themselves. Even though the Dutch, Israeli and Palestinian committee members organize the seminars out of their own enthusiasm, motivation and idealism, the objectives are not set pretentious; no explicit expectations for the outcome of the seminar are expressed.

The experience of difference and pain which participants can have, is not erased, but is explicitly recognized as part of the real experience of the participants, even though others may not recognize themselves in that experience.

During the seminar, the Dutch facilitators have no other controlling role than facilitating the program of the seminar and ensuring that the conditions for the sub-objectives are met. Much responsibility will rest on the shoulders of the Palestinian and Israeli committee members. They coach the participants

during the seminar and ensure the smooth running of the program. We are convinced that this encourages the internal motivation and the contribution of both participants and committee members.

Participation in the seminars should be accessible to every young Palestinian or Israeli who wishes to participate and to recognize these terms. Participants are recruited from as diverse and as random a group as possible, which represents a broad cross-section of the Israeli and Palestinian populations. Committee members are responsible for this. In practice, this means that they refer mainly to their own social networks and personal recommendation. The organizational structure and culture of the local committees is not formal. This accessibility also refers to the atmosphere of the seminars: we aim for a casual and approachable atmosphere, so that all the participants will feel welcome and dare to express themselves.

4. Method

This section describes how the above set objectives are aimed for within the outlined conditions.

- Role of the board of the COME Foundation
 - security of continuity
 - raising of financial resources
- Role of the Dutch committee members:
 - organizing and facilitating the seminar (logistics and arrangement of physical resources)
 - maintaining communication with the local committee members
 - ensuring that the conditions are met
 - possibility of role of mediator
- Role of the local committee members:
 - outline of the program (in cooperation with the Dutch committee members)
 - preparation of the activities of the seminar
 - recruitment, selection and preparation of the participants
 - implementation and management of the primary activities at the seminar
- When recruiting participants, making sure that distribution by sex and religion is equal
- Three 'circumstantial' groups (Jewish Israeli's, '67 Palestinians and '48 Palestinians) to be in balanced proportions (with 30 participants: 12 Jewish Israeli's, 10 Palestinians '67 and 8 Palestinians '48)
- Stay in a hotel, on full board basis
- Shared rooms, with one participant from each 'circumstantial' group
- English is the main language, everyone must have a substantial level of English
- Individual acquaintance (participants get to know each other through introduction exercises and listening exercises)
- National acquaintance ('circumstantial' groups get to know each other through group discussions)
- Political acquaintance (individuals get to know each other opinions through discussions in smaller groups)
- Undertaking activities together, including activities with creative expression. Goal:
 - opportunity to learn to negotiate
 - opportunity to strengthen one's own group
 - opportunity to obtain a common goal
 - opportunity to cross boundaries
 - opportunity to connect on the level of emotions and feelings
- Leisure (deliberately kept outside the program). Goal:
 - opportunity to strengthen motivation
 - possibility of group formation
 - opportunity to relax and release tension
 - possibility for personal initiative
- Possibility of introduction of theoretical frameworks and expertise
- Daily evaluation within the committee and final evaluation with participants

Explanation of the method

Dutch board members of the COME Foundation ensure the possibility that regularly seminars are held and arrange the financial resources to continue organizing seminars. The Dutch project leader is responsible for practical organization and facilitation of the seminar and ensures an accurate financial covering of the seminar. The Dutch committee members who attend the seminar, are also responsible for achieving the objectives and ensuring the conditions of the seminar. They can also act as mediator in any disputes or disagreements between participants.

The local committee members prepare (together with the Dutch members) the program and the primary activities of the seminar. They jointly carry out the program and share the lead on activities. After the seminar, they can help participants who want to stay in touch, for example by setting up an email or Facebook group.

The seminar takes place in a hotel (usually in Cyprus), on the basis of full board. Because of this, participants can fully focus on the content of the seminar. In addition, some potential participants are more likely to participate with these conditions. We make a room partition where Palestinian and Israeli participants stay together in a room (men and women separate). This may promote contact with 'the other', enhance basic contact skills and make the everyday, human side of 'the other' visible through small, daily actions. The official language is English.

The seminar starts with introductory exercises to 'break the ice'. Individual acquaintance is made, thus to build confidence for future discussions. National acquaintance (acquaintance between Palestinians and Israelis as groups) offers the possibility to exchange knowledge and provide discussions. Political acquaintance takes place, in which individuals have the opportunity to express emotions and share opinions about issues that concern them. There are listening exercises to encourage participants to listen actively and to hear and respect opinions of others. There are group sessions for the whole group, mainly used for general feedback and summarization of activities in smaller groups. Many activities take place in small groups, to ensure that individual participants will show their identity and feel more quickly confident to express their own feelings and opinions.

There are activities taken together, including creative activities. Objectives are to learn to negotiate as groups and individuals, to strengthen each national group, to develop a sense of belonging as a variety of groups and individuals by seeking a common goal, to cross boundaries between groups, and to not only talk to the others on a rational level, but also to meet each other on the level of emotions and feelings. There is free time scheduled in the program. This provides participants with the opportunity to relax, to let group formation processes occur, to strengthen motivation, to get new energy for the activities in the program and to unload emotions.

During the seminar, the committee members have a daily recurring joint evaluation to optimize the conduct of the seminar and the group processes. At the end of the seminar, there is an individual, anonymous written evaluation, followed by a group-based oral evaluation with all participants. These evaluations are intended to ensure and/or strengthen positive, effective elements in the seminar in the future, and to remove or modify negative, ineffective elements in the program.