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# The Haifa Council of Volunteer Organizations

# Challenges and Dilemmas of an Umbrella Organization

*Yael Abada*

Thisnew paper reviews the challenges faced by the Haifa Council of Volunteer Organizations (CVO) as the umbrella organization of third-sector organizations working in Haifa, Israel. It will review challenges that affect our everyday decisions and shape the council's activities. Most likely, some of these challenges affect other umbrella organizations as well, while some are unique to the CVO and are the result of local, historical, structural, and organizational factors.

## Background

In Haifa, we enjoy a large number and a wide variety of community activities. There are over 300 registered NGOs working in the city in all walks of life: health, education, welfare, environment, women, social change, culture, sports, religion, and more. Most of these organizations provide various services to the public, while some do lobbying and advocacy work.

The CVO, which was founded in 1983, is a nonprofit umbrella organization that brings together many of these organizations. Surveying the history of the organization, we can distinguish two phases: the first, from 1983 to 2005, and the second, from 2005 to this day. In the first phase, the CVO was founded by several familiar and well-established organizations and was operated by volunteer work only. Its goal was to connect and correlate the various organizations working in Haifa, and its activity amounted mainly to monthly social gatherings in which members gave updates on their organizations' work, went on field trips, or listened to lectures.

The second phase, which started about five years ago, involved a real changeover in the council's structure and character, after the Social Justice and Civil Society

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(SJCS) Committee of the Boston-Haifa Connection of Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) decided to realize its vision of strengthening the civic society in Haifa by ideologically and financially supporting the CVO. Since then, the council has undergone extensive changes, which presented complex challenges and turned into a sort of "inter-generational" struggle between the old and the new conceptions. Change did not come at once. It was a long and slow process (so as to not arouse too many objections, among other reasons). It involved studying the existing situation as well as the desired goals, and was conducted by way of agreement and not by way of revolution. The two phases differ in almost all aspects — mission, goals, organizational structure, and activities.

## Challenges Resulting from Organizational Structure

**The Board of Directors.** The statutes of the CVO state that its board of directors should include representatives of 14 different organizations. Naturally, such a structure is a source of conflicts and dilemmas. In any other organization, members of the board of directors have to see, first and foremost, to the organization's needs. Members of the CVO's board, however, are actually members of other organizations and represent them, a situation that might lead to a conflict of interests (for example, struggles over resources or financial information). The amount of time members of the board devote to the council instead of devoting it to their own organization presents another challenge. Members of the board might face a dilemma; they might find themselves asking, To whom am I more loyal? What organization is more important for me? Which one do I want to promote more?

Moreover, in the past, representatives of organizations on the CVO's board did not always hold key positions in their own organizations, that is, they did not have a senior, decision-making status. Consequently, there were many delays and setbacks in making decisions and advancing projects and programs. In the last two or three years the situation has changed, because the council has slowly gained a significant and influential status, making seniors want to be more involved in its activity. Nevertheless, the CVO is still the "second priority" for board members, and most of their time and effort is directed at advancing their own organizations' interests and not necessarily the council's. This structure of a board of directors is a challenging one, and sometimes weakens the organization instead of strengthening it.

**Equal Status for All Organizations.** The old statutes reserved seats on the board for five organizations that were among the ones that founded the CVO. This meant that these organizations had a permanent place on the board of directors, without being elected every two years like any other organization. Consequently, organizations' representatives changed constantly and did not have a high sense of obligation and commitment toward the council's activities. Moreover, this prevented others from

being elected, and we think it was not in accordance with the legal requirements of board members to be personally committed to and responsible for the council. After a long process that lasted for nearly three years, the statutes concerning the permanent seats reserved for the founding organizations were revoked, with the objection of the older organizations but with the support of all the others. Today all representatives are elected equally.

**Relationships between Staff Members and Volunteers.** A number of volunteers objected to hiring employees to administer the organization and to conduct its projects, and as a result, several of them stopped participating in its activities. Most members, however, understood that hiring permanent and committed employees who would work mainly for promoting the organization's goals was essential to its proper functioning and development. Nevertheless, some volunteers viewed it as a sign of mistrust in their commitment and claimed that there was a deep contradiction between the council's name and the hiring of employees. They were not willing to accept the director's authority, reserved their loyalty and commitment to the former volunteering management, and were not committed to the new one. As a result, some of the volunteers left the organization.

## Challenges Resulting from the Definition of Mission, Goals, and Limitations

In the first few years following the "changing of the guard," a complex process of defining the council's mission and goals took place. Naturally, the new management wanted to apply its own world views, which were more progressive and proactive than the "old" management's. We were deliberating whether as an umbrella organization the council should lead social-change actions and conduct its own activities instead of encouraging its member organizations to act: Does the leadership of the umbrella organization strengthen or weaken its constituent organizations? Will the council be perceived as pushing the other organizations aside, as their competitor? Which issues should the council deal with, and which ones should it not interfere with? What does the council have to offer organizations in Haifa? And, what do we need the CVO for, anyway?

In order for the council to stay faithful to its cause, we conducted a process of defining our mission and goals together with our "customers" — the organizations themselves. We invited all the organizations in Haifa to participate in several meetings of strategic planning. Of course, not all organizations took part in it but, overall, about fifty representatives of various organizations participated in these meetings. In addition, the council holds roundtable forums that meet several times a year to discuss, among other things, these issues.

The process is never-ending: In each forum or meeting, these questions are raised and discussed, both in meetings of the board of directors (which, as was said, is

composed of representatives of various organizations), as well as in staff meetings. Sometimes when discussing a project, the first questions we ask ourselves are: Is this the council's job? Should not one of the organizations conduct this project? Is this an issue common to several organizations? Does the project fulfill our mission — to strengthen the third-sector organizations operating in the city?

When coping with such dilemmas we are always guided by two fundamental principles: (1) we avoid competition, that is, the council does not work in fields and areas in which other organizations act and does not compete with them; (2) the council focuses on developing collaborative efforts and professional skills. The council also faces questions and dilemmas concerning the issues with which it deals: We do not specialize in poverty, but we activate a forum of organizations that assist impoverished families; we do not specialize in special needs, but we organize a forum of special-need organizations; we do not specialize in helping new immigrants or in the special problems of youths in Haifa, but in these areas, we conduct roundtable discussions. We may say that the council specializes in correlating and coordinating between various organizations that work in similar or parallel fields, and in developing mutual thinking and activities. The council specializes in community organizing: locating and recruiting interested bodies, developing collaborations, building networks, and arranging forums.

The council is especially advanced in the field of professional training. We offer professional training courses, seminars, and workshops in a diverse range of inter-disciplinarian and cross-sectoral fields: training courses for organization directors and volunteer coordinators, as well as seminars for functioning under stress and in times of crisis. We make sure that courses are attended by representatives of all professional fields and social groups, and so, besides studying and developing professional skills, courses allow participants to meet with colleagues and fellow activists with whom they would normally not have a chance to meet. The most successful part of our training program is the Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange, which brings together directors of organizations working in various fields, deepens awareness of social-justice issues, establishes a network of directors in Haifa and in Boston, and by that strengthens local social solidarity.

## Challenges Resulting from Collaborating with a Diverse Range of Groups

In the past, organizations that participated in the council's activities were older, well-established, mainstream, service-providing organizations, composed mostly of adult Jewish members. Later, as an umbrella organization, we aimed at connecting with other target audiences that were not involved in our activities or represented in the various forums we conducted. We made a great effort to include Arab, new

immigrant, and orthodox Jewish organizations, as well as environmental and social-change organizations. This proved to be a complex move. Up until several years ago, the council's image was of a "social club" — old-fashioned and insignificant. It was hard to bring together social-change organizations and environmental organizations, to enlist Arab members to a "Jewish" organization, to attract young adults to join a "veteran" organization, to include religious organizations in a "secular" council. It was hard for these diverse organizations, so different from one another, to find common fields of interest and to rise above prejudices and political and ideological disputes. To overcome this problem, we applied a strategy of "focalized active courting." For each activity we planned, we located all the social groups that may be interested in the subject; we then recruited organizations by advertising in newspapers, on mailing lists, and on our Internet site, and later by meeting with organizations' administrators in person.

A change started when various organization began joining specific programs that provided them with immediate benefits; for example, when we coordinated the distribution of food packages to impoverished families, or when we offered a volunteer coordinator course, a director training program in collaboration with Bostonian organizations, or emergency and crisis preparation seminars. After participants started meeting and getting to know each other, they realized that they share mutual needs and challenges, and when they started trusting each other, they began to understand that coordinated activities can help all organizations achieve their own specific goals, as well as advance the Haifa civic populace in general. Organizations and directors that took part in focalized activities usually continue to be involved in the council as board members, conference planners, members of the steering committee for the Haifa Volunteer Week, and as strategic planners. Moreover, collaborations between organizations continue even after the termination of formal collaborative programs. Nevertheless, we must note that, alongside these successful efforts, participation of Arab and orthodox Jewish organizations in the council's activities is still relatively low.

## Challenges Resulting from the Relations between NGOs and the Establishment

As any other NGO working in Haifa, the CVO also faces dilemmas and questions concerning its relations with the municipality. Under its former leadership, the council's policy was to try and become closer to the municipality, especially to the Department of Welfare, and to conduct collaborative activities as much as possible. The new management, on the other hand, attempted to make a clear distinction and separation between the CVO and the municipality. This distinction was extremely important, because it allowed the council to form its own independent identity and mission, as well as to position itself as an umbrella organization for other NGOs. The

council's separation from the municipality is a complex and delicate issue: On the one hand, it is supported (although quite modestly) by the municipality, it is interested in establishing good work relations with its departments (mainly the welfare and education departments), on certain tasks, it has to collaborate with the municipality and even under its direction (in emergencies), and many of the member organizations take care to maintain good relations with it. On the other hand, several of the member organizations are fighting against some of the municipality's policies, and even the council itself cannot always tolerate its often patronizing, demeaning, or ignoring attitude towards NGOs. In its relations with the municipality, the CVO tries to maintain a fine line between collaboration and opposition, closeness and separation.

## Challenges Resulting from the Relations with Organizations Working Nationwide

**Competition.** The CVO is a distinctively local organization, striving to represent and promote all organizations active in Haifa, and in all of its activities, it emphasizes its "Haifaite" character. Nonetheless, situations of competition or conflict of interests with other, national organizations might sometimes occur. Several national organizations, for example, offer professional training courses and seminars. To avoid competition, the council might cancel one of its courses, change its program or its subjects, or collaborate with the "competitor" organization. Another example of competition is the contrast between the publicity given to the Good Deeds Day conducted by Ruach Tova, as compared to the Haifa Volunteer Week, which will probably never receive such wide coverage in the national media. A local organization stands little chance when competing against a highly funded, well-connected national organization.

**Exclusion.** Many times we experience difficulties because most of the council's activity is limited to the Haifa area, which is relatively distant (more psychologically than geographically) from the center of Israel. It is quite difficult to get senior position holders, such as important officials, members of the Knesset, or government ministers to attend events held in Haifa, for example. It is also difficult for us to join forums of national organizations' directors, because they admit only directors of organizations that work nationwide, which are mostly situated in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Haifa is perceived as a remote place and the CVO is perceived as a small organization, although in many cases, its activity takes place on a larger scale than that of national organizations.

Another form of exclusion, or a symptom of the center–periphery conflict, is the fact that in many cases, local branches or representatives of national organizations have to ask their organization for permission to attend the council's activities. Some national organizations do not allow their local branch directors to attend our forums,

to list the branch in our local directory book of organizations, or to attend one of our courses. Consequently, the council's dealings with the organization are sometimes conducted through its national head office and not through the local branch.

**Collaborations.** Several of the CVO's programs are conducted in collaboration with national organizations. Our most important collaborations are with the JDC Israel, a large organization that deals with a variety of fields and issues all over Israel. Our work relations with the JDC are mostly related to emergency management and social strength programs. Today, this collaboration is very successful and productive; it is built on mutual trust and it benefits both parties. But in the beginning, it was difficult and complex: A small, local, constantly-changing, low-budget organization was facing a big, national, well-established, experienced, and prestigious organization. Confrontation was unavoidable. The struggle over who would run the projects, control the budgets, and make the decisions, as well as the JDC's patronizing attitude toward the council nearly brought down the project and almost caused us to give up a huge donation. Luckily, mutual efforts brought reconciliation and we managed to build a real partnership, which has kept going for the last three years and allows the CVO to develop and thrive.

## Summary

Volunteer organizations are working in a geographically, politically, managerially, and financially complex space. Every day, we make decisions that take these complexities into account. The short review given here is an attempt to present several of the challenges and dilemmas that the CVO faces as an umbrella organization of NGOs working in Haifa. Some of these challenges are relevant for other organizations; some are typical of umbrella organizations and are related to their unique relations with other organizations and with the establishment. It appears that the principles to which the council adheres, namely, not to act in place of other organizations, to act only when we can offer a specific and unique function, and to focus on professional training and developing collaborations, help us answer the needs of NGOs working in Haifa, who increasingly make use of the council's services and become active partners in determining the CVO's objectives and activities.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Yoram Arnon*