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Sociocultural community development as a lever of social change

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Article abstract

As a tribute to the thinking of Jean-Claude Gillet, this article aims to make accessible in the English language some of the notions of sociocultural community development and its function developed by this author in relation to their testing during a recent training course on the theme of Social action in times of crises: sociocultural community development as a lever of social change in the Middle East and North Africa region. Based on the knowledge of the participants and faculty members, this paper proposes a broad reflection on sociocultural community development as it is currently experienced and desired in various countries (Yemen, Syria, Libya, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine). This reflection, co-constructed from contexts experienced by the participants and selected contributions in reference to inspiring authors such as Gillet, seems necessary today for the potential development of intervention and investigation tools supporting social change in the English-speaking Arab countries.

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Social action in times of crises in the MENA region: sociocultural community development as a lever of social change

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En hommage à la pensée de Jean-Claude Gillet, cet article vise à rendre accessible en langue anglaise certaines des notions de l'animation socioculturelle et de sa fonction développées par cet auteur en relation avec leur mise à l'épreuve lors d'une récente formation sur le thème de L'action sociale en temps de crise : l'animation socioculturelle comme levier de changement social dans la région Moyen-Orient et Afrique du Nord. Sur la base des connaissances des participants et des membres du corps enseignant, ce document propose une réflexion étendue sur l'animation socioculturelle telle qu'elle est actuellement vécue et souhaitée dans différents pays (Yémen, Syrie, Libye, Irak, Liban, Jordanie et Palestine). Cette réflexion, co-construite à partir de contextes vécus par les participants et de contributions sélectionnées en référence à des auteurs inspirants tels que Gillet, semble aujourd'hui nécessaire pour le développement potentiel d'outils d'intervention et d'investigation soutenant le changement social dans les pays arabes anglophones.

Mots-clés : Animation, recherche, pratiques, changement social, Moyen-Orient et Afrique du Nord

As a tribute to the thinking of Jean-Claude Gillet, this article aims to make accessible in the English language some of the notions of sociocultural community development and its function developed by this author in relation to their testing during a recent training course on the theme of Social action in times of crises: sociocultural community development as a lever of social change in the Middle East and North Africa region. Based on the knowledge of the participants and faculty members, this paper proposes a broad reflection on sociocultural community development as it is currently experienced and desired in various countries (Yemen, Syria, Libya, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine). This reflection, co-constructed from contexts experienced by the participants and selected contributions in reference to inspiring authors such as Gillet, seems necessary today for the potential development of intervention and investigation tools supporting social change in the English-speaking Arab countries.

Keywords: Sociocultural community development, investigation, practices, social change, MENA

Como homenaje al pensamiento de Jean-Claude Gillet, este artículo pretende hacer accesibles en lengua inglesa algunas de las nociones de la animación sociocultural y su función desarrolladas por este autor en relación con su puesta a prueba durante un reciente curso de formación sobre el tema Acción social en tiempos de crisis: el desarrollo comunitario sociocultural como palanca del cambio social en la región de Oriente Medio y Norte de África. A partir de los conocimientos de los participantes y del profesorado, este documento propone una amplia reflexión sobre la animación sociocultural tal y como se vive y se desea actualmente en varios países (Yemen, Siria, Libia, Irak, Líbano, Jordania y Palestina). Esta reflexión, co-construida a partir de los contextos vividos por los participantes y de las aportaciones seleccionadas en referencia a autores inspiradores como Gillet, parece necesaria actualmente para el desarrollo potencial de herramientas de intervención e investigación que apoyen el cambio social en los países árabes anglófonos.

Palabras clave : Animación, investigación, prácticas, cambio social, Oriente Medio y Norte de África

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Introduction

As a tribute to the thinking of Jean-Claude Gillet, this article aims to make accessible in the English language some of the notions of sociocultural community development and its function developed by this author in relation to their testing during a recent training course (March 2021) on the theme of "Social action in times of crises" in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This training course, conducted in collaboration with the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID), the Geneva University of Social Work (HETS) and the An Najah University in Nablus, has been designed for development professionals living in English-speaking Arab countries and enrolled in the Development Policies and Practices (DPP) Executive Master's programme[1]. It has been built based on the results of recent research[2] conducted jointly by these three universities in the field of social action in Palestine. These results open up new avenues of investigation and intervention in the field of sociocultural community development in the fragile contexts of the MENA region, which are discussed in the conclusion of this article.

This contribution puts into perspective the needs identified by professionals in training from various countries (Yemen, Syria, Libya, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine) concerning the deployment of sociocultural community development in the MENA region. It highlights their reflections on the following points:

- The relevance of the international definition of social work for the MENA region.
- The popular education and the capability approach, questioning the interest of referring to authors from other geographical regions of the South for the analysis of sociocultural community development and its political contribution in fragile contexts such as Palestine.
- The values and cultural specificities that underpin the work of community developers in relation to development needs in MENA fragile states.
- The role of participants as potential actors of change through the analysis of the function of community development according to Gillet (1995, 2021) and his idea of "extra-territoriality", which puts the imaginary at the centre of thinking about the action at a local level.

Based on the knowledge of the participants and faculty members of this training, this paper proposes a broad reflection on sociocultural community development as it is currently experienced and desired in the MENA region. This reflection, co-constructed from contexts experienced by the participants and selected contributions in reference to inspiring authors such as Jean-Claude Gillet, seems necessary today for the potential development of intervention and investigation tools supporting social change in the English-speaking Arab countries.

Reflections on sociocultural community development in the MENA region

The DPP session "Social action in times of crises in the MENA region: sociocultural community development as a lever for social change" takes as its starting point the global definition of social work widely recognized by universities and social action professional organizations also in the Arab world. This session has reflected on the participants' intervention contexts and

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1. https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/dpp.
2. « Relations between family situations, social work and schools to foster children's resilience towards violence. Case study in the Occupied Territories, Tulkarem, Palestine", Seed Money, Leading House – HES SO (finalized). "Looking at alternative social innovative approaches in Tulkarem to foster children's resilience towards violence in Occupied Territories", Palestine, Innovation starting grant, Leading House – HES SO (in progress).

their positions as potential actors by proposing not only to analyse existing public policies and their target audiences, but also to identify the actors, facilitators or "mediactors"[3] (Gillet, 1995 and Augustin & Gillet, 2000a) involved in, or able to, be mobilized in a transformation dynamic, including in fragile contexts (Augustin & Gillet, 1996). Recourse to the theoretical and sensitive heritage of Jean-Claude Gillet has seemed relevant during this training because of the need to imagine and evoke 'elsewhere' (real or fictitious) as a form of 'extra-territoriality' of sociocultural community development, making it possible to better think about the localized dimension of the action of professionals in relation to a specific territory and the actors involved (Gillet, 2021). Before continuing with his heritage, it is necessary to take the time to present and discuss the global definition of social work.

Global definition of social work: is it relevant to the MENA region?

> Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Underpinned by the theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (IASSW General Assembly and IFSW General Meeting, July 2014).

The first sentence of this definition closely links practice and discipline, social work being action-oriented. Theory is therefore built from practice and vice versa. Thereafter, this will allow the understanding of the construction of social work in the MENA region in close relation to the practice of sociocultural community development through the example of Palestine. Another important aspect of this definition is the way its audience is considered, by engaging people and structure. They are no longer passive beneficiaries, but actors of their life and environment. In other words, they are considered citizens. Social work is therefore a means of citizenship by developing tools and levers of action for the "empowerment" and "liberation of people".

Based on this definition, the following question has been discussed between participants and faculty members: what is the relevance of this definition for the MENA region?

Reflection of faculty members

> This definition is relevant to the understanding of how social work has been developed in Palestine, through practice first, and then through theories, in order to cope with the different crisis that we are living in since the occupation. It is important to analyse how people have started to mobilize themselves in response to the needs of the population. We have many years of development of social work in the field, in particular of sociocultural community development. Now we can understand from the different programmes and approaches (theories) we used, how social work promotes change and empowers individuals and groups to be more independent. We work with people and not for people. The question is always: How can we encourage individuals and groups to create change in their own lives?

Reflections of participants[4]

> Libya, as you know, is a country in political transition. It is interesting to think about the maturity and the quality of social work in a country or society linked to the government structures and the models of governance that have been adopted. During Khadhafi's regime (a total autocracy), there was quite a restricted approach to social work. Social change was under central control and heavily politicized. Unions and social movements were not mobilized properly. At the grassroots, there was careful political control. Since the revolution, this has changed but there is not a new vision of social work. We are still between two orders: the old one and the new one. If we take this global definition of what social work needs to be: "working with people rather than working for people", we can say that Libyans want to be actors since the fall of Kadhafi. So, this is an important revolution in the mindset.

> Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, social work needs mainstreaming. Another type of education, which is the civil society education, has not been very popular in Syria. Through the ten years of conflict, few initiatives were

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3.   According to Gillet, the « mediactor » is the strategic competence of the professionals into action that allows the implementation of new procedures for the resolution of conflicts between individuals, groups and institutions and favours the constitution of intermediate spaces of negotiation and the construction of new knowledge (1995, p.184).
4.   In order to guarantee the anonymity of the participants, this text does not mention precisely the author of each reflexion.

made to orientate social work well in terms of professional skills. In this context, where there is no academia, the international organisations have worked to build the capacity of the national actors, mainly frontline workers who are assigned as social workers. This is not adequate to guarantee the outcomes of the actions and performance of the social workers. What is most important in this kind of context is to initiate the education of the community with the support of local leaders and social action professionals.

Based on these testimonies and the need identified for community capacity building, two concepts of the global definition of social work: "empowerment" and "liberation of people", are chosen to initiate a reflection on sociocultural community development in the MENA region.

Some theoretical references concerning sociocultural community development

In the English-speaking MENA region, the observation that there is no consensus definition of community development (Gillet, 2006) is consistent with the observations done by Lafortune and Antoniadis in a recent article entitled "(Community) development resulting from community action" of the *sociocultural community development and practices journal* (2018b). Nevertheless, these authors propose a definition of community action:

> Community action refers to any initiatives that come from a community (local, identity-based, or interest-based) or from public institutions, through professionals, with the goal of providing a collective solution to a social problem or common need. Its history is multifaceted and, in some countries, barely documented. It can use strategies that are consensus-based, that raise awareness, or that even involve conflict, as long as it is based on the principle that citizens have the most aware knowledge of their experiences, that they have resources, and that the process created by the action increases their power to act (Lafortune & Antoniadis, 2018b).

In relation to this definition, a reflection on community development is initiated from the experiential knowledge of the participants.

Reflection of participants

> Social work and sociocultural community development stop at a certain level and cannot go beyond the humanitarian assistance because of settlement. All the efforts to have development, social cohesion, empowerment, and liberation of people have failed, for instance, in Palestine. How can you move people from humanitarian assistance to development? What kind of intervention is possible? They are still under either one crisis to another. There could be empowerment but who is going to use this empowerment or these empowered or liberated people to build the development of a country?

Taking into account the knowledge of the participants, two authors from the South have been selected and discussed in order to understand the notions of "empowerment" and "liberation of people" in relation to the action of community developers. On the one hand, Paulo Freire (Brazil), through his political project of conscientization of dominated populations, who proposed education ("Pedagogy of oppressed") as a vector of capacity development and empowerment in the 1970s. According to Freire, conscientization is more than awareness, because awareness is a normal way of being human. Conscientization involves analysis. It is a way of seeing the world in a rigorous way. It is a way of seeing how society works. It is a way of better understanding the problem of interests and the question of power (Freire, 2001). The meaning of action for Freire lies in the conscious development of people's capacities and positioning, considering that there is no transformation or overcoming of the situation of oppression except by moving from a relationship of domination and dependence to one of dialogue (Freire, 2001). In line with Freire's thinking, community developers become popular educators capable of accompanying dominated groups in a process of awareness, empowerment, and transformation of their initial position. With a democratic aim, their action would encourage the voice and participation of the diversity of populations as full citizens.

On the other hand, Amartya Sen (India) and his approach of capabilities offer interesting keys to understanding the "liberation of people" by recognising individuals and their personal aspirations. Sen's thinking is distinguished by a vigilance towards any professional practice that might assimilate individuals to their group of belonging. It should be remembered that this author has developed his thinking from his intimate knowledge of the Indian context, which is strongly marked by communal and inter-religious tensions. This approach is thus interested in the freedoms of a person (Sen 1985 and 2002) that can be judged through explicit reference to outcomes and processes that she/he has reason to value and seek (Sen, 1999, p. 86). Moreover, it allows us to conceive the potential capabilities of a person in relation to his/her environment:

The capabilities that a person actually has (and not merely theoretically enjoys) depends on the nature of social arrangements, which can be crucial for individual freedoms. And there the state and the society cannot escape responsibility (Sen, 1999, p. 253).

Thus, according to Sen, the environment (state and society) should support the sense of freedoms of people, enabling them to lead the life they want. In this perspective, development professionals are the companions of individual freedom aspirations whose action should favour their expansion by considering the positional objectivity (Sen, 2002 and 2009) of people, which means their personal conception of social reality.

Both theories (Freire and Sen) define the potentiality of social and political action supporting individuals and groups with the accompaniment of community developers.

Reflection of a participant

> There are several tensions regarding freedoms versus development. For instance, the way community developers interact with society but also interact with social contract, the relation between citizens and the state that allows community developers and citizens to act. By definition, social work and sociocultural community development are in a contest tension between revolutionary (freedoms) and evolutionary (development) goals. Behind this is the question of the social contract and the values of a society.

Reflection of faculty members

> Social work is new in some of our contexts. When we look at people and community developers' response to crisis and political situations, we can see that there are seeds for social work in our universities. It is important to think about what kind of professionals we want to have in the field.

These reflections lead us to think about the social, political, and historical construction of sociocultural community development from a concrete case of the MENA region: Palestine, and the desired professional postures that allow us thereafter to refer to the function of community development according to Gillet (1995).

Political contribution of sociocultural community development in Palestine

In 1948, as a result of Al-Nakba (Palestinian Exodus)[5], community development and social work have emerged in the wake of the huge number of refugees, which was caused by the establishment of the State of Israel. In this context of crisis, quick intervention was needed and the Palestinian community was mobilized by individuals who felt responsible to help other people in need. This intervention took different forms such as providing shelters, food, and medical aid.

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5. Between 1947 and 1949, at least 750,000 Palestinians from a 1.9 million population were made refugees beyond the borders of the state. Zionist forces had taken more than 78 percent of historic Palestine, ethnically cleansed and destroyed about 530 villages and cities, and killed about 15,000 Palestinians in a series of mass atrocities, including more than 70 massacres.

At that time, Mrs. Hind Al-Huseni was a well-known woman for her role; she sacrificed her life to provide support for orphans. She started as a teacher, then she quit to become a community developer. After 1948, she opened a shelter for orphans and schools that have remained open till now. In her intervention, she was providing emergency relief services for refugees and affected populations (Selwadi, 1994). In the early 70s, she launched the first two-year social work diploma programme in East Jerusalem. Through this example, the roots of community development in the Occupied Territories of Palestine and its impact on building social work can be understood.

From the beginning of the occupation, social action has been organized by community grassroot groups in different neighbourhoods and committees, which is a way for Palestinians to support each other. They used the concept of "O'neh", which represents community organizations to confront the political, social and economic situation that has resulted from the absence of the state (Al-Araj, 2018, p.33). "O'neh" has become part of the Palestinian tradition. Through the continuous precariousness of life and the ongoing struggle, community development and social work emerge as professions in response to the needs of Palestinians. As Al-Kilani (2017) argues, this emergence includes the accumulation of efforts and experiences of many players in the field trying to respond to the needs of Palestinians. Since the occupation, the variety of social problems faced by the population required the development of services (Safadi, Easton, 2014), which came in parallel with the hope of building a State (Al-Kilani, 2017). Ramon (2006) argues that Palestinian social and health services in the Occupied Territories have expanded, as a result of the impact of the conflict. From the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, state services have been developed, supported by international donors (Ramon, 2006).

Community development and social services aim at furthering people's resilience, and at supporting each other in order to meet their basic needs to survive the situation and maintain hope and strength in confronting life hardships. Paker (2018) argues that community development and social work have an essential potential for developing and encouraging resilience and hope, and highlights the sacrifice made by volunteers and professionals working alongside marginalized and disadvantaged people. Much support and many services have been provided based on the volunteers' knowledge of their community as a spontaneous response to people's urgent needs. Therefore, in Palestine, the social work profession is seeded in community development actions, which were taken in different forms, either as individuals or members of community organizations (Al-Kilani, 2017). The accumulation of community developers' experiences and efforts in responding to the precarious Palestinian experience in everyday life enhanced the development of social work as an academic discipline.

During the second Intifada, despite the difficult conditions, there has been an opportunity to develop skills and learn techniques of intervention. Indeed, the interaction with international groups and organizations providing different emergency social intervention programmes help in training the professionals out in the field (Ramon, 2006).

Palestinian community developers and social workers face many ethical dilemmas during their interventions by working in precarious situations and conditions, and by feeling insecure themselves. As their territory has become a place of checkpoints, barriers and walls that carve up the area of the Palestinian Authority into small, circumscribed spaces, the simplest of journeys become arduous and degrading. People spend hours trying to circumnavigate checkpoints to reach a destination. In this environment, the minds become limited, possibilities narrow, and the bodies become vigilant and hypersensitive to threat and danger. In reference to Sen, this

environment hinders the expansion of individual freedoms (Sen, 2001). In such a context, for Palestinian community developers and social workers, providing support has become a way of resistance. They have become both helpers and survivors by their practices in time of stress and anger, which can present challenges to professional values. Despite their personal suffering, they continue to work with people, trying to support them and considering their action as a national obligation in the hope of a better future.

In summary, the Palestinian community development, which was based on spontaneous volunteer initiatives for many decades, has become a political act to resist the occupation and to keep the community together. The experience of injustice and oppression has enhanced community development to play a role in empowering the population (Freire, 2001), even though there are still many challenges to allow community developers to use the empowerment and liberation approaches.

Community development values and development needs in the MENA region

The Palestinian example opens the debate on the values that guide the construction of sociocultural community development and, more broadly, of social work in the fragile countries of the MENA region. Indeed, values are integral to the development of social action in a context or a territory.

Reflections of participants

> Values are not static. They are variable. We cannot define specific values, as, in the Arab world, we are in transition: politically, economically, and socially.

> Since the Arab Spring, values are a work in progress in our countries. There are core values for the fabric of our society, as solidarity, cohesion, support and help to the people in need. There are also values linked with religion, which are embedded with culture and education. Values are a target for debate because when a society changes, a lot of them are reviewed. But solidarity at the grassroots still remains today in the MENA region. We have seen it during military escalation, during conflicts, during terrorism and also during the harsh economic and political events.

> There are different ways of looking at solidarity with regards to social action:

> - The government and the public sector identifying needs and developing public policy.
> - Local NGOs developing actions in accordance with Islamic values.
> - International organisations and NGOs running social actions according to an international agenda.

> Community activism is the missing part of social action in the Arab context. The facilitator working with citizens at the grassroots does not exist sufficiently for the moment. In a broader sense, the sociocultural community development should be developed in many MENA countries because it is the closest to the grassroots of society. That also means a lot of engagement at the citizenship level.

> During dictatorships, the people's role was limited. After the revolution, people have started saying: « we want to be part of the change ». The challenge now is that this energy is not well channelled towards development. People still have a lack of citizenship culture, which has to be one of the main objectives of civil society organisation and government programmes. The level of understanding of citizenship is still very basic, it is limited to: « we want to get, we don't know how to give back ».

Reflection of faculty members

> Social work in Palestine has started to impact academia by being practice oriented and through the experience of sociocultural community development in the field. We have seen that this kind of work is assumed by some leaders and associations (civil society) who are able to influence society and to make change. That was not the case of the government. Sociocultural community development in Palestine has started by building networks and by mobilizing people. In the 90s, we had social movements supporting people, as we did not have a recognized state. It is important to imagine possibilities of action despite the absence or fragility of the state in MENA countries.

State fragility is discussed with participants based on two recent reports concerning the shock-response of national social protection systems and its resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO & UNICEF, 2020, UNICEF, 2019). These reports offer a comparison between different

countries of the MENA region in order to highlight some development needs in terms of social protection system at the national level. Their limitations are related to the exclusive consideration of the formal policy systems and the non-recognition of the sociocultural community development actions assumed by associations and local NGOs at the grassroots. Therefore, the data collected appears partial and does not reflect the action carried out on the ground based on solidarity.

The possibility of imagining and creating new possibilities and a sense of reality through sociocultural community development leads the participants and faculty members to reflect on the function of community development and the idea of its extra-territoriality in reference to Gillet (2021, 1995).

Function of sociocultural community development and its "extra-territoriality"

Jean-Claude Gillet develops the function of community development in order to define the praxis (Gillet, 1996), the heart of professional action which reveals its strategic intelligence (2021), particularly in situations of conflict and asymmetrical relations, by promoting the participation of individuals and groups, which is in line with the theses previously presented of Freire and Sen. The next diagram presents the modelling of the function of community development according to Gillet (1995).

This modelling is discussed with participants from the MENA region.

Reflection of faculty members
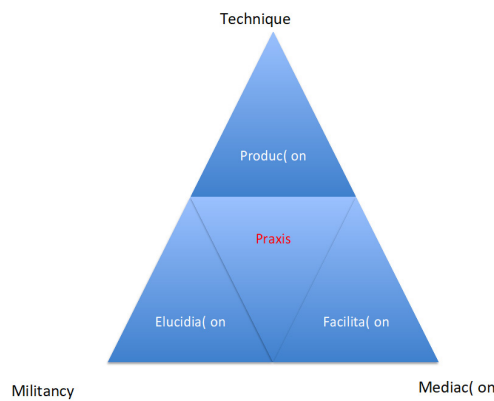
Modelling of community development function (Gillet, 1995)

Poles	Field	Typology of actions	Positions	Logic of action
Production	Action	Activities Programmes Results Control	Technician/ Expert	Practice
Facilitation	Ties /relationship	Operation Negotiation "Mediaction"	"Mediactor"	Strategy
Elucidation	Cognitive/intellectual	Analysis	Activist	Ideological

Legend: three poles of the community development function building the praxis

This modelling of sociocultural community development is very relevant today in Palestine because we are promoting empowerment and we are focusing on participation, advocacy, and channel to strengthen the perspective of actions in different ways. The function in this context is related to a professional trying to develop within his or her community in many perspectives. Depending on the situation, the professional moves from the position of technician/expert, to that of "mediactor" and activist. Gillet's modelling is very relevant because it makes you think of how you can develop a community in a context of constant crisis by changing position; how you can strengthen resilience of people in different ways and try to create the change they want to make.

Reflections of participants

In the Arab world, sociocultural community development function is in its early days, especially when we look at the participation of the population. We come from traditional local norms and belief systems. There are tensions between different values in competition, which have been exacerbated in the geopolitical sphere and under the difficult economic conditions that our countries are facing. It is a very blurred view, in terms of where are we going with our society, in terms of identifying how sociocultural community development and more broadly, social work, can become the pillars of social development and change. How would citizens shift in terms of receiving and of being the actors themselves? How can they be empowered in unstable political contexts? The changes have not yet materialized and matured enough in terms of communities adopting, for instance, participation as a value. We might come to realize new dogma in terms of social activism. We will have to work within the political sphere. The challenge will always be: how can we mobilize social change within the current social contract?

Reflection of faculty members

It is important to recognize that, in a context of crisis, we need time before starting to mobilize people. We have first to understand and start to mobilize ourselves. Because we have been in a crisis in Palestine for a long time, usually people respond to needs. This is the interest of sociocultural community development and its impact on social work: how flexible is it? How does it respond to the needs and the situations? It is not something going on separately. It is not something from the outside. It is within the context. Therefore, our intervention, our action will be built according to the context and the situation that are happening. Therefore, we have an important role to play in our context by being imaginative and aware of our situation and of the different positions we can take.

Reflections of participants

In the context of Palestine, the maturity level would be much higher. Certainly, in our context, it is interesting to think about it.

I would like to problematize the issue of social work in Palestine. Most of the social work is funded by donors and not by the government. The Palestinian government has 70% of its budget funded by donors. Therefore, if we have good budget, we will have good services for the citizens. We are facing a decreasing budget from donors. Therefore, to what extend can we develop something like this (Gillet's sociocultural community development function, and more broadly, social work) as we are relying on international donations? I am sorry because my point of view is very pessimistic. However, I cannot see the light.

Reflection of faculty members

In Palestine, most of the social work relies on individual initiative: NGOs and civil society (sociocultural community development actions). A very interesting thing happening in the West Bank and in Gaza, is the focus on empowerment and making people challenge their own situation by creating their own projects. That is one perspective of how community developers and social workers can innovate. We cannot always rely on international funds. Because we experience many times cuts in international funds, for examples in 2006, when many countries and donors started to stop their funds, or now with the departure of the UNRWA[6]. However, at the same time, we see individuals and NGOs starting to develop their own approaches to invest in the community and to contribute to their community. So, it is not clear that sociocultural community development and social work have always to be dependent on the government or international donors. They have to start being connected with the community and with people: individuals and groups.

Through this reflection between faculty members and participants from the MENA region on the function of community development as a potential vector of mobilisation and transformation, the "hope" of which it is the bearer, often underlined by Jean-Claude Gillet (Gillet, 2021), emerges. According to this author, sociocultural community development contains a utopia (Gillet, 2021 and Augustin & Gillet, 2000b) as a place of experimentation of new possibilities and innovations of a better living together, which leads to consider it not only in a situated way. This leads us to consider it not only in relation to a specific territory in which its actions are deployed (Lafortune

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6. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (https://www.unrwa.org).

& Antoniadis, 2018a), but also in an extra-territorial manner (Gillet, 2021) as a space conducive to the imagination, which authorises the continuous search for vectors of citizenship. For Jean-Claude Gillet, community development "remains anchored in the idea of citizenship necessary for humans to become human" (Gillet, 2021). This is why he believes that "community development participates in denouncing the legitimacy of a world that is sometimes upside down and offers a space for realistic imagination" (Gillet, 2021).

It is precisely a process of "realistic imagination" about contexts in crisis and potential levers of action through sociocultural community development that was initiated in the era of the pandemic and e-learning with this training session for development professionals from the MENA region. This process continues today, keeping in mind the heritage of this author, through participatory research in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank, Palestine (Saleh, 2021) and training linking innovative investigation and intervention (Augustin & Gillet, 1997 and 1998) in Arab countries.

Conclusion

The voices we have heard through this article give us interesting insights from both an academic and an action point of view. Firstly, the recognition of the increased need for social cohesion in fragile contexts. This need for cohesion can only be achieved through the participation of local communities and the mobilisation of their resources. Secondly, ensuring that any form of social action brings about change that empowers local communities questions the 'social contract' and the values that underpin community development, social work and action. The "realistic imagination", through concerted collective actions leading to community development, raises the pragmatic question of the 'how do we make it'? In contexts where institutions are weak and resources mobilised for fragility, violence, and conflict mitigation (most of the MENA countries fall into these categories), the development of capacities through innovative tools is an essential point to consider.

The three poles of community development function and praxis (Gillet, 1995 & 2021) discussed in this paper provide a good starting point for understanding community capacity development. The framework proposes a model that identifies key fields for capacity development in community development, which interweaves programming tools, results-oriented actions, monitoring, interaction/relationships (mediation and negotiations) and analytical skills. The development of such skills can only be achieved if their values are embedded in the social contract, as the various contributions in this paper emphasise.

However, in this discussion, the context of fragility, conflict and violence must be considered as well. Various research, including ours, showed that in most cases, social action does not address or mitigate violence in itself, but creates a 'ventilating space' where violence is expressed in an 'accepted way'. The 'victim of occupation' or 'resistant to occupation' in the Palestinian Occupied Territories for instance is narrative and a justification for accepted forms of violence. Community development should aspire to change these societal practices and it is also necessary to understand the intervention processes of social action in the specific context of violence, conflict, and fragility with the ambition to improve the intervention models to help mitigate violence and strengthen communities' resilience to violence. In addition, the context of COVID-19, its uncertainty, and unclear long-term consequences, should not be overlooked. Interventions of any kind will have to respond to the specificities of a post-COVID world whose boundaries remain elusive. The provision of skills and development of capacities are also dependant of the operating context.

The weakness of social intervention in the MENA region, its institutions and social protection systems is widely documented (Saleh, 2021; Bashir, 2016; Ramon & al., 2006); it is further emphasized since the pandemic (IFSW, 2020a) by the urgent need for innovations in the field of social work and protection that can effectively prevent crises and mitigate violence, especially in a fragile context such as Palestine (IFSW, 2020b), Libya, Syria, or Iraq. The conditions for the creation of this type of innovations, which promote not only participation or emancipation of populations but above all inclusive societal transformation, are little discussed by researchers, practitioners, and beneficiaries of social action (Garcia Delahaye & al., 2021). In this perspective, thinking about how to build capacity through a concerted collective approach to meet the conditions for innovative social action is a first step in the right direction.

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