**Introduction:**

Many of the suggestions that came out of the brainstorming sessions on democracy were related to programs for youth, and this meeting was designed to allow youth to have an input concerning this particular matter. The session was conducted mainly with youth activists, the aim being to allow them to present their point of view concerning ‘democracy development’ programs and projects in Palestine, challenges facing the new generation working in the field of rule of law, democracy and civil society empowerment, initiatives taken by youth, and suggested mechanisms for the future. Fourteen representatives of Palestinian youth participated in the meeting.

The Session:

Participants were keen to come up with an accurate definition of the term ‘democracy’. There was a feeling among certain participants that the term ‘democracy’, as being promoted in the world today, is based on dictatorship, not only in terms of the way in which it is exercised, but also given its effect on the war on Iraq, especially in light of the widespread nature and size of the anti-war protests. Participants recommended that in order to guarantee positive reform, this kind of terminology should be changed.

According to the participants, the definition of ‘democracy’ usually refers to the Greek model, which, as they were quick to point out, excluded certain sectors of the society, such as slaves, or ‘non-citizens’. A democratic system according to the participants is one in which people participate in the making of decisions, based on citizenship and the sovereignty of the people, and where there is respect for all sectors of the society, regardless of religion, gender, ethnic background, ideological approach, etc. Such a system, they added, is based on a constitution and people participate in the making of laws either directly or through representation. Within this type of system, free elections are held, with the protection of minorities and opposition parties. The rule of the majority is guaranteed, together with the rights of minority groups, freedom of expression and religion, and human rights.

Palestinian youth, said the participants, often feel powerless, marginalized, and alienated from the decision-making process. The Palestinian Constitution was mentioned as an example, and participants complained that the people in general and youth in particular had no say whatsoever in its drafting.

Social and political constraints make it difficult for youth to achieve their goals said participants. While certain youth representatives are given training in the field of governance, such courses are frequently doomed to fail to bring positive results due to the difficulty of applying certain ideas within a patriarchal, authoritarian system. Accordingly, youth sometimes become obliged to resort to undemocratic solutions because of the difficulties associated with applying democratic values in an undemocratic society (which is reflected in different aspects of life, such as the way in which men perceive women, how decisions are taken, the way authority is viewed, etc). Participants mentioned this idea more than once.

Politically, although the local instability (Al-Aqsa Intifada) creates certain constraints for youth, it also motivates them to search for initiatives for change and action. Participants mentioned the activities of PYALARA, Nuwat, and Naseej etc in this regard. Representatives of such groups and other organizations working in the field of children and youth activation (The Young Scientists’ Club, YMCA, etc) spoke about their experiences and achievements.

***Nuwat:*** A youth initiative that emerged during the invasion of March/April 2003. Most of Nuwat’s members are between 22 and 35 years of age, and most work in the private sector. Although the members of Nuwat come from different sectors of the society, many of them hold influential positions in the organizations for which they work. The number of members is currently about 60.

Among the goals of Nuwat is to make it easier for youth to help in reforming society according to their ideological convictions. Nuwat aims to be a group that is qualified to speak on behalf of the Palestinian society to the international community and that is capable of reflecting the Palestinian cause.

Nuwat’s activities are based on voluntary action. Members explained that their goal is not to turn into an NGO or a political faction, but to become an important independent youth movement capable of facilitating change.

Among the constraints of Nuwat is the low participation by the popular base.

***The Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and Rights Activation (PYALARA): In helping to activate leadership and rights awareness, PYALARA***, as a media-oriented organization, pays special attention to the need to ensure that future leaders possess good communicative skills. The activities of PYALARA include the publishing of *The Youth Times* newspaper and other activities such as the ‘Youth to Youth Hotline’ and the ‘Training in Journalism’ and ‘Promoting Youth Rights in Palestine’ programs.

Participants mentioned how in participating in certain activities, youth, although initially enthusiastic, often give up easily later on when confronted by obstacles without even endeavoring to resume the action plan involved. Another problem, they said, is the fact that there is a tendency for youth to come up with certain initiatives in times of conflict, only to stop working when the danger is over without taking into consideration all the other problems that require immediate attention. Participants also mentioned the fact that youth often fail to work hard enough to lead change, which in their opinion, is something that results from the feeling of powerlessness that comes from living under occupation, the frustration of the older generation, the difficulties involved in trying to take part in the decision-making process, and the need of youth for venues where they can improve their skills.

Many Palestinian youth, said participants, tend to search for a certain kind of utopia, believing that the answers can be found in either the past or the future. This tendency, they added, has negative consequences, such as resorting to fundamental religiosity (and misinterpreting religion in a way that hinders democratic work instead of understanding the humanitarian and ethical essence of religion).

While some participants mentioned that Palestinian youth often lack sufficient channels for expression, others insisted that such channels are available, due to the active nature of the Palestinian civil society as compared to that existing elsewhere in the Arab World. Supporters of this argument believe that it is youth themselves who are responsible for initiating and working on reform. The problem facing Palestinian democracy, as expressed by the participants, is that there is no effective dialogue that accepts the other and no effective continuity of what is being done; groups begin to work but cannot guarantee that their members will stick together and succeed in finishing the job.

Participants also expressed the opinion that Palestinian youth are not exposed enough to foreign cultures, which makes them more likely to fall into the trap of ignorance, ready-made clichés, presumptions and generalizations, exclusivity, and prejudice. Some participants felt that youth should stop blaming others and finding justifications and instead, search for alternatives and possible work plans in order to empower themselves and their culture while focusing on the ‘here and now’. In doing so, said the participants, they need to work cooperatively to achieve common goals, with each side perfecting its work and behaving democratically on a daily basis.

Participants mentioned the importance of *living* democracy on a daily basis and were critical of the fact that democracy in Palestine appears to be a very vague concept characterized by the making of speeches and the passing out of brochures but very little practicing of its real essence on the ground. They were also very critical of the behavior of certain representatives of organizations working on governance and the fact that they frequently contradict their teachings in their daily lives.

A great deal of funding has been used for democracy and civil society projects, but although many of the projects have been successful, others, said participants, have focused on specific groups while leaving other sectors of the society marginalized. Moreover, some projects have been based on the idea of importing certain ideas from other experiences and applying them to the Palestinian case, which, according to the participants, is not a good idea given the special nature of the Palestinian experience and the different cultural norms that are rooted in the Palestinian society. Participants emphasized the fact that if change resulting from the active participation of the people is the goal, then it has to reflect the local culture. Many initiatives, said participants, have been introduced with a cheer, but failed to include follow up or practical applications. A lack of cooperation or channels of dialogue was mentioned as a related problem. Participants were also critical of how funding is often directed to programs that are not necessarily needed by the society, as well as the multiplication of tasks, especially in regard to certain organizations that have little or no experience in specific fields and whose ‘specialties’ often proliferate according to funding.

Among the solutions suggested by participants was developing a better educational system and promoting awareness in schools whilst stressing more on democracy as a way of dealing and thinking on a daily basis. A number of initiatives have emerged in this regard, such as the PLC project for democracy enhancement among youth, which was mentioned by one of the participants. The six-month project involved the participation of sixth grade students and teachers from Ramallah and Rafah, who were chosen from private, UNRWA and public schools, and who were helped to become acquainted with the concept of democracy, the Palestinian democratic system and the Legislative Council. A six-day summer camp focusing on the concept of democracy was organized for selected students, and towards the end of the camp, student elections were held according to the PLC structure model and 44 students elected as council representatives. Afterwards, a student parliament was elected, PLC members were hosted by the schools, and discussions were held between the members and the students concerning the work of the Legislative Council.

Participants emphasized the importance of improving the educational system, especially in light of the fact that it often fails to reflect democratic education principles. Within the context, they said, critical thinking must be reinforced and social activists must dare to change and challenge the society, all the while adhering to the ethics in which they believe.

One of the responsibilities of youth, as mentioned in the discussion, is found in the fact that they need to work on ‘the self’ in order to ensure the existence of a better society. This requires not only depending on the political context of democracy (elections, parties, decision-making, etc) but also focusing on the daily cultural context and linking that to the concept of citizenship, dialogue and respect for the opinion of the other, family life, improving the social system (social, health, educational insurance), and rule of law.

It was suggested that the level of democratic success or failure should be estimated according to the democratic transition in the country involved.

Towards the end of the session, participants were asked about their suggested programs for future funding, and whether the funding should cover democracy programs. Certain participants replied that if funding was to be directed toward democracy programs, then the programs in question should be based on identifying the needs and priorities of the society. Other participants said that they considered investing money in the field of democracy a waste and would prefer that the money be spent on the improvement of the infrastructure (social, economic, industrial), and especially on education (schools and universities, vocational training). The argument was that if a level of prosperity and development were to be maintained, democracy would develop naturally. Others expressed the belief that every project or program should include a unit specialized in democracy, and that this is preferable to investing in special programs for democracy. Many participants mentioned that funding on democracy is not a priority and that the funding should be directed instead toward capacity building programs and building a new leadership and human cadres, who would then go on to apply democratic principles whilst working toward change.

***SWOT Analysis:***

Strengths:

* Organizations achieving and leading progress
* A potential educated youth sector
* Support for youth programs originating from international aid sources
* Student council elections

Weaknesses:

* The lack of a proper definition of democracy
* Negative criticism rather than a serious search for alternatives and possible work plans, a tendency to look for justifications and put the blame on others
* Yearning for either the past or the future instead of concentrating on the ‘here and now’ and failing to maintain the same level of enthusiasm when working or else freezing the work without making any attempt to resume the work plan
* The limited awareness on the part of youth concerning Palestinian culture and history and the absence of indigenous innovative thinking
* The culture of marginalizing the other, exclusivity rather than inclusion
* Insufficient intuition
* The failure to work cooperatively on achieving common goals
* A tendency to come up with initiatives in times of conflict without paying attention to other needs, both then and once the crisis is over
* False generalizations
* Insufficient follow up and a failure to implement the ideas and recommendations associated with democracy programs and courses

Opportunities:

* The existence of certain youth initiatives such as Nuwat, Naseej and PYALARA
* The availability of a number of Palestinian NGOs and funding organizations that work in the field of democracy and youth empowerment
* Good human resources and cadres
* An active civil society

Threats:

* Political constraints
* The fact that democracy is implemented ‘dictatorially’ in Palestine and that many people working on democracy projects fail to act in a democratic manner
* Imposed democracy, which fails to take account of the local culture
* An imposed constitution, in whose drafting the people had no input
* The failure to incorporate youth in the decision-making process, resulting in youth alienation and powerlessness and the inability of youth to affect the situation
* An undemocratic Palestinian society and educational system: authoritarianism, patriarchal system, ignorance, illiteracy, etc
* Programs directed to the elite rather than the marginalized sectors of the society
* Interpreting religion in a way that hinders work on democracy
* The tendency to associate funding with a certain agenda rather than direct it to the needs of the society
* The failure of some organizations to identify their field of work and focus on a specific field, which leads to duplication, a lack of concentration and the inefficiency of work (for example, some organizations working in the field of the empowerment of women suddenly start working on issues relating to children or other issues with no connection to their specialty or the needs of the society)
* The failure to follow up the work being done

Recommendations:

* Finding a suitable alternative to the term ‘democracy’
* Youth intuition and initiatives toward change based on voluntary action
* Using the funding for effective programs that would develop the individual economically and culturally
* Moving toward focusing on a wider spectrum of people, reaching out to social layers that have an intermediate education and providing them with a better income and civic education
* Capacity building: building a new leadership and empowering it with democratic practices and applications
* Starting with the self: every Palestinian must perfect his/her work, and youth should be encouraged to organize and participate in cultural sessions, in order to lead social change
* Taking into consideration the needs and characteristics of the society
* Leading initiatives for change based on voluntary action and not necessarily waiting for funding sources
* Incorporating youth in the making of decisions and involving them in the drafting and amending of the Palestinian Constitution
* Not depending merely on the political context of democracy (elections, parties, decision-making, etc) but also focusing on the daily cultural context and linking that with the concept of citizenship, respect for the opinion of the other, family and daily life and a better social system
* A better educational system, critical thinking
* Reaching out to peripheral areas and sectors of the society
* Ensuring that every program involves the establishing of a special committee that deals with/is specialized in democracy
* Investing in the individuals and teams responsible for running institutions
* Establishing industrial, vocational, and educational development programs
* Enhancing democratic dialogue