

Entrevista Eleonora

- UPP

Hi Eleonora! Thank you so much for accepting our invitation. We can start. Firstly, we would like to know something about the kind of work your organization “Un Ponte Per” (A Bridge To...) is doing in Iraq. For how long have you been there in the country?

Un Ponte Per... (UPP) is an Italian non-governmental organization established in 1991. The mission to Iraq is UPP's oldest one, since it started during the first Gulf War at the beginning of the 1990s. The first name of the organization was, indeed, “Un Ponte per Baghdad” (A Bridge to Baghdad). We were actually one of the first international organization that come here. Since then up to now, we kept on working on support the people, standing by civil society and defending all the minorities that enrich the diversity of the country's population. Then, in the last, more or less, six years, we focused our programs mainly on humanitarian rights. This change of focus came after the worsening of the humanitarian situation caused by the unrests happened in the region starting from 2011. At the beginning we worked mainly with Syrian refugees arriving as a consequence of the Syrian upraise. Then, we had to cope with the great amount of Internal Displaced Peoples (IDPs) from Iraq caused by the emergence of ISIS. Generally speaking, our mission is the one to implement humanitarian aid programs to support the most vulnerable within the population and protect minorities. Along with it, we also put effort in peacekeeping activities.

According to what you can see on the ground through the work of UPP, can you give us an overview of the main challenges you are facing in the country? How is the current refugee issue in Iraq?

The situation of refugees in Iraq is very complex due to two main factors. The first one is the Syrian war, which led something around 250'000 people crossing the border and looking for help in Iraq. Most of them stay in Kurdistan, the Northern part, and mainly live in refugee camps. The second factor is ISIS that, even if nowadays looks almost defeated, have forced hundreds of thousands of people to leave their houses in 2015. IDPs are around two millions people and, as much as Syrians, they came to Kurdistan and are hosted in camp-settings. Then, alongside ISIS withdrawal, humanitarian organization are trying to take care of the people still leaving in the liberated cities, which confront other types of problems. For instance in the capital of the Nineveh governorate, Mosul, which you may have heard of from the news, as it was one of the most important hotspot in the confrontation with ISIS. The city was heavily bombed during the battle, therefore it is not easy to go there and to move around. People cannot return to live in the city now, so they have to stay in the camps until

conditions gets better. For Syrians the issue is the same. They cannot go back to Syria because the war is ongoing and the future is uncertain. For these reasons, the situation is still very complex.

One question about ISIS. Did the establishment of the Caliphate affect the work of international NGOs? Were you working in those areas occupied by ISIS? What did you do?

In that period, three of four years ago, we had to leave some of the areas where we were working. For instance, we were rebuilding and rehabilitating some schools; we were working in the library of the University of Mosul; we were working with other organizations representing minorities. Because of ISIS we had to stop these projects, leave the city and reduce our area of intervention just to Kurdistan. Now, that those areas are set free, we went back and we discovered that one of the school we had rehabilitated was completely bombed and destroyed, as most of Mosul as well. Therefore, now we have to go back to what we were doing and restart the work. We are trying to help the population still living in the city but, as you can imagine, it is more difficult due to security-related issues. There are still areas with mines or unexploded bombs. Moreover, looking at the social aspect, there is still tension within the population due to the traumas experienced yet recently. One of the field we have been focusing on in these years, with refugees and IDPs, is related to mental health. This is the most important part of our health support programs. For mental health, we mean mainly post-war traumas. Accordingly, we bring on projects of psychosocial and psychological support, as well as mental health psychiatry for both adults and minors. We are doing this type of work all across the liberated areas. In some areas, like Mosul, we also run projects with gender-based violence survivors. Looking from our perspective, our job is not only the one to care about past traumas but also try to prevent that further problems come about. For this reason, we do actives directed to promote social cohesion. These activities aim at bringing people from different religion and ethnic groups together and are organized within different youth centers around the cities. People from 18 to 35 years old can take part in this program. Our goal is to find a common ground to discuss humanitarian aid and cultural differences between them.

How many people are working for UPP in Iraq?

We are around two hundred. Only ten people are expats/international and the rest are locals.

For locals do you mean just Iraqis or may be also Syrians, Lebanese or others?

Actually the local population is composed by Iraqis, Kurdish, Syrians. Then, it also include refugees, both IDPs and not. They may be Christians, Yazidis and Muslims. There is a lot of diversity! They all work together and I consider this as our best result. There are a lot of languages going on as well. For instance, there are people speaking mainly Kurdish, other Arabic, Syrian or Aramaic. Part of our work on social cohesion passes through the selection of our staff. What we do is to try to maintain an equilibrium between the nationalities, ethnicity and religion of the people that we hire. Then it depends on the area and on the dimension of every group. Sometimes it is better to select people directly from the ethnic group you are targeting. For example, in the Syrian camp were we are working we try to get all the people from that community. If we work in the Yazidi camp, we work with a Yazidi staff.

Are the refugee camps mainly divided by religion or ethnicity? For example, only Syrian or only Yazidi camps? Do you work also in mixed camps?

Many camps are mixed but some are not, mainly due to logistical reasons. To make an example, most of the Yazidi community, which survived the genocide made by ISIS in 2014, moved from the Sinjar to the

North, all at once. This means tens of thousands of people moving from place to another at the same moment. Accordingly, the community lives in camps that were built for this purpose and host almost only Yazidis. Indeed, it was impossible to find another setting, due to the overwhelming number of people. Then, for example in the case of Syrians, the camps are mixed, with Christians and Muslims. In the Youth Centers that we have outside of the camps, peoples come from all the ethnicity and religions and take part to the same activities.

How is, in general, the relation between different ethnicities and religions across the country? Is it conflictual? Is it violent? Is it peaceful?

Within the liberated areas, such as the Nineveh governorate and Mosul, the situation is still a bit tense. We are trying to do activities meant to get people together, but the relation between different groups is still conflictual and there are a series of grievances in-between them. In particular, when it comes to dig into conflictual points in order to find a common ground, then some grievances emerge. There are some tensions between Christians and Muslims, or also within the Muslim community, as on the role of Muslim Brothers. Anyway, our goal is to help them going back together living in peace. We keep a lot of faith in the good outcomes of this effort, as it is also witnessed by the feedbacks coming from these communities. I must stay that they are active in this effort as well. They are also trying to overcome the differences and work together to improve the situation.

From your point of view, are the administrative and governing authorities committed to trying to make the situation better? What is also their relationship with international NGOs?

We speak about two different local authorities. One is the national Iraqi government. The other is the local government of the Kurdish Iraqi region, which has a certain degree of autonomy. We have mainly a good relationship with both of them. This is also because we have been here since 1991, we are grounded in the country and the authorities know us very well. Moreover, we try to keep the number of expats low, compared to other organization, and this is very much appreciated. Involve the local population is a good starting point to be accepted and keep a good relationship. Our work aim to build the capacities of local actors and civil society.

We would like to go a bit more deep in the type of activities UPP manage in Iraq. Which kind of programs are you currently developing and implementing? Which different areas do you cover, both geographical and thematic ones?

Ok, we work in the three governorates of Kurdistan, namely Dohuk, Arbil and Al-Sulaimaniyah. In these areas, we have different activities, according to population's needs. We work in the rest of Iraq as well, in particular in the Nineveh governorate, Baghdad, and in the South, such as Nasiriya and in the Tigris Marshes. Actually, in Kurdistan, we mainly do humanitarian work inside two big programs, which are social cohesion and health. For the health program, activities are divided in two sectors that cover reproductive health and mental health. For the social cohesion part we run education and cultural projects. Then, for the rest of Iraq, mainly in the South (Nassyría), we do peacekeeping activities. These activities are directed to the support of the civil society through campaigns and events that involve local actors. We also do events focused on cultural difference between minorities in the region. This is something that other humanitarian organization do not do, but for us the cultural part is very important. For our projects, the targets are mainly refugees and IDPs, but we also work with local community.

What do you mean for local population?

Of course IDPs are Iraqis as well but from different regions. For local people I meant non-displaced ones.

Talking a bit more practically, how do you meet people in need? Do you just work within refugee camps and aid centers? Or do you have someone else that give you referrals?

So, in the oldest camps where we are working in, we have our own centers. In many camps we are delivering aid from several years, therefore people know the services that we have and they come to the centers by themselves. We have this kind of containers within the camps where you can go and ask for the kind of help you need. At the same time, we also receive referrals from other organizations. For the work outside the camps it works basically in the same way; we get referrals but we also have centers around the city. Moreover, in the past we also had mobile units to go from village to village, where there are lack of services or there are difficulties to reach established aid points.

Do you have any data or figure about the number of recipients who benefit from your programs? Or is it difficult to make a calculation of these numbers and why?

It is difficult to have exact numbers now, but actually, tens of thousands of refugees do live in the camps. Moreover, we also do activities called “communication with communities”. It is about mass communication and we do it together with UNCHR. In practice, we bring on campaigns of mass communication about services, policies, people that are looking for other people living in the camp, prevention or health. Anything that can be useful for the life of refugees in camps.

I can imagine that you coordinate with other NGOs. How does it work? Do you coordinate both at the ground level and at the higher level?

Yes, we coordinate both at the higher level and on the ground. At the macro-level we conform, of course, with UN agencies standards and requests, in particular for the funds that we receive directly from UN agencies, such as UNDP, UNICEF and UNHCR. Then, most of the refugee camps are practically managed by UNHCR. Therefore, we are doing all the activities within the camps under the supervision of the UNHCR. Moreover, we talk a lot with the local authorities. For instance, for the health programs we organize the work together with the Directorate of health, which is part of the administrative health system. The same happen for educational programs, which are coordinated with the Ministry of Education. At the micro-level, what we do is trying to coordinate with the local organizations, because we believe that in the long term they are the one that need capacity build and need to bring on this work. We do not really believe in the idea of foreign NGOs coming here to deliver services directly. We always try to connect with locals. At this moment, many of the organizations we are working with can be more or less autonomous. They have access to direct funding from donors, like the UN agencies, and they implement humanitarian projects by their own. We are very proud of these people because what we actually would like to see more and more is local organizations to be able to search for funding and attend the needs.

Are there a lot of local (not Western) organization?

Yes, there are a lot of them and they are actually very active. Some of them are active at the local level, others are more national. There are many organizations that operate all across the Kurdistan; someone in the Neveveh governorate; others in Baghdad. Few of them are working in different governorates at the same time. We work with women organizations, Yazidi organizations, a-political organizations and others. In general, we try to collaborate as much as possible with organizations representing and giving voice

to civil society. It is the best way to let emerge all the expertise and the possibilities already existing within the society.

For how long have you been there in Iraq?

I actually just arrived in Iraq, I use to live in Jordan before, and now I am going to stay here, probably, a couple of years.

Is there any story about culture, language or particular experience that you want to share with us?

It is very exciting working here because the people are amazing. There is a very interesting mix of different cultures, religion and ethnicities. From the outside, Iraq may look just as a huge desert with wars, but, actually, the reality is different. The civil society here is looking for cohesion and they are doing their best to improving their life. Regarding the language, I use to live in Jordan before, where I learnt the local dialect and I could speak with everybody. When I arrived here, I discovered that everything is completely different because people speak Kurdish, Assyrian and modern Aramaic. Others speak Arabic with a different accent than the one I learnt. It is common to find an ordinary person that speaks four or five different languages fluently. Most of these languages are the ones you read about in the Bible, such as Aramaic or Assyrian. It is very interesting. It is also incredible the number of different cultures and the historical heritage you have in the area. It is a pity that ISIS or other groups like that were trying to destruct this mix but, inshallah, all the minorities will keep staying.

You worked for UPP in both Iraq and Jordan. How is the difference in the kind of projects and activities you are implementing? Jordan is generally a peaceful country when Iraq is experiencing war from many years. How does it affect the projects you put forward?

As you said, the situation is very different. Jordan is a livable country, although it hosts around one million refugees. The country is still stable. The capital city Amman is safer than how it could be Milan, Naples or Medellin. Iraq is of course in a completely different situation due to the protracted war. In many areas such as Baghdad, Mosul, not to mention Kirkuk, the situation is delicate, sometimes critical. Iraq is a country that underwent years and years of war between civil wars and unrests. Terroristic groups are still active in the south of the country, making it a completely different world than Jordan. The kind of work UPP does in the two countries is a bit different. In Jordan it is more directed to development projects and aim to improve the economic and living-standard possibilities of those refugees that arrived four or five years ago. It is more about helping the state and the local system to sustain the situation. At the opposite, in Iraq, the war is a recent trauma and situation change very quickly. Accordingly, the work focuses more on the emergencies and the short-term needs.

For you as a person, how did it changed? I can imagine that in Jordan you had much more free space for living and moving. Now you are probably much more restricted in both your private and working life. For instance, today you delayed a bit the interview because you were blocked by a checkpoint and there was one street closed.

Yes, Jordan, as I said, is safer than many countries in Europe and I had not any problem. Here is different, for sure. All of our movements are monitored; we are not allowed to go in certain areas; we cannot to go out in certain times. When we move from a city to another, we have to do it before

the sunset. We have to take all the necessary precautions and plan everything in advance, accordingly. Moreover, in particular zones, like Mosul, we cannot stay after the sunset. We just go there during the day when the security is higher. In Baghdad it is pretty much the same, but more complicated. As you know, or maybe not - I do not know how much on international media they are still talking about...-in Baghdad there are still car-bombs and accidents every day. Therefore, when we go there we have really to plan every steps that we are going to take and be monitored every moment.

In the framework you are describing and considering that the situation is still a lot political-dependent and military-led, is the work of international cooperation useful? Can you see results or not?

International cooperation is essential in these areas, for instance here in Iraq and in Syria. It is both working out and crucial. The results are tangible every day. We are talking about a country that underwent years and years of intense war, so it needs international support to deliver humanitarian help and cope with protracted crisis. I also think that to take care of this hundreds of thousands of refugees that arrived here, or were displaced here, is a duty of the international community. Europe does not want to take many of them, right now. Consequently, the countries in the Middle East are hosting the large majority of the Syrian refugees. It is a duty of the international community to take part of the burden of this effort. It cannot be just a burden sharing between the countries in the region. Many of them have other problems to face as well.

To conclude, why did you choose this job? Why did you choose this life? I mean, living in Iraq is not something easy. You cannot go out at night, you have curfew, you probably cannot drink or make party. What led you to this choice?

International cooperation is something that I choose from the university. Then, I have always been interested in the Middle East and I wanted do my part to support the most vulnerable. I considered international cooperation the best way to do so and I still believe that, if this work is made in a certain way, it is very effective. I mean, it can deliver the right messages and the right support. UPP in particular is deeply committed to polity works, which is something I also like. This is a great part of our mission and is exciting from my point of view to take part in this process. Moreover, in Iraq there is so much to be done. Fortunately, the population here is amazing and they really want to go on and live in peace with each other. It is great that international cooperation is doing all of this!