



مجلس الكنائس الشرق الأوسط

The Middle East Council of Churches

## **MECC Unit on Diakonia & Social Justice**

### ***Summary Report***

**January – September 2008**

**Presented to Executive Committee meeting  
29 September – 3 October 2008**

**Cyprus**

**By**

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# MECC Unit on Diakonia & Social Justice

## *Summary Report*

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### **Introduction**

The emergence of new challenges and crises with all their implications has deeply affected the life and the mission of the churches and hence MECC. MECC is called to witness in an increasingly complex situation in both the churches and in the world to respond to the changing times by being up to date and relevant in terms of program, structure and action. For the past many years, debates were going on MECC's future towards a clearer identity and profile referring to it as programmatic reorganization, or simply restructuring of MECC on a focused and oriented mission of churches. The question as to how does MECC understand itself today stands of high importance and relevance.

The following overview summarizes the activities, the aims, constraints and the aspirations of MECC Unit on Diakonia and Social Justice Program in the context of restructured MECC.

Upon the decision of the 9<sup>th</sup> General Assembly the Executive Committee brought changes in the structural make up and some of the programs of MECC. Among the changes being the downsizing of the Unit on Life and Service and limiting the activities to Service to Refugees, Displaced and Migrants and renaming the Unit to Diakonia and Social Justice. While the General Assembly thought that the Council's structural changes would bring betterment of work, it also recognized that the financial pressures would downsize some of its programs. However at the partners meeting in May 22-24, 2007 in Beit Anya in Harissa, the issue of migration, migrants and refugees was raised as top priority and recognized by partners as an imperative issue and decided to be assisted financially. The issue was reported to the 9<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in Cyprus and agreed that the Executive Committee in March takes decisions. It was decided then that MECC programs should continue carrying its mission in Diakonia and Social Justice activities for the survival and welfare of the migrants in the region. Since the Middle East Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which through Diakonia, transcends the confessional, national and cultural boundaries and struggles against social injustice, it was agreed that the Unit should go on in serving the marginalized the migrant and the refugees, in concert to the mission and vision of the churches. DSJ was therefore mandated to be in solidarity with the oppressed the poor and the exploited, in the aim of abolishing social injustices, and in the aim of "transforming the cosmos in all its dimensions, structures and manifestations"<sup>1</sup>

**Why Diakonia?** Throughout the years MECC has developed into an organization of churches where churches voice their concerns, pursue their interests, protect their rights, expose their needs and appeal for solidarity. However, MECC is not merely an organization with administrative objectives and practical goals, it is a fellowship of churches with specific nature and definite goal, the goal of "visible unity of churches in one faith", and multidimensional vision with concrete constituencies of diakonia, justice and renewal.

Stemming from this perspective the mission and vision of Unit on Diakonia & Social Justice focus on the active and concrete involvement of God's call, in peoples' struggle for self-realization, self-reliance, renewal, development and liberation as the core and essence of the mission of the churches and as a unifying force of churches.

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<sup>1</sup> Aram I Catholicos, Keshishian, "In Search of Ecumenical Vision", Antelias 2002

It is through diakonia that churches transcend their confessional, national and cultural boundaries and look at themselves through the eyes of the others, and experience the sense of belonging to each other, the community of sharing. And it is through diakonia that churches grow together in unity, unity expressed in service, deepened in service and tested by service”<sup>2</sup>.

The Diakonia and Social Justice program of MECC is therefore, mandated to promote and concerned in supporting churches in their services for refugees, advocating for their rights, Implementing UNHCR program for refugees, developing human resource for social services, training in a variety of fields, collaborating regionally and internationally for the promotion of and welfare of the oppressed.

### **The general focus areas of the DSJ Unit program**

Although financial concerns dominated all the programs of MECC however, the Unit on Diakonia and Social Justice has managed to carry on its activities forwarding a four year plan covering the period of 2008 -2011 focusing on the Service to refugees, displaced and migrants. It responds to the victims of war and persecution, the poor, the marginalized and the stranger. It implements its programs in cooperation with appropriate UN bodies (UNHCR) and ecumenical organizations and local authorities. It promotes the ministry of the uprooted and responds to the challenges they face providing legal, social, and other services through the following focus areas:

#### **I- Networking and advocacy activities**

Advocacy activities and projects are developed by the Unit on DSJ in collaboration with national institutions and Human Rights Institute in order to support and promote change in the lives of the poor and the marginalized, in order to promote changes in institutional policies and practices or individual attitudes.

A close collaboration with the Ministry of Labor, Interior Security Forces and the General Security, facilitates the networking and bridges the gaps between the CSOs and the National Institutions is developed.

- Activities include: advocacy workshops, publications, audiovisual materials, commemoration of refugee and migrants days on local and regional levels, campaigns, lobbying, written briefings, media, interviews and articles, participation in international conferences dealing with migration issues
- Raising awareness and promoting issues of refugees and migrants at national & regional level.
- Creating toolbox of materials, printing materials on Human Rights standards and principles.

#### **II- Interregional collaboration and Joint Working group meetings**

In view of exchanging information and experiences on refugees and migration issues of concern to the ecumenical organizations and the churches, in view of sharing information and advocating on the situation of Christians in the Middle East and other issues of concern to the ME and Europe, interregional collaboration has become a focal point for both European and Middle Eastern partners to follow up the recommendations of Global Ecumenical Network, Amman Process and Joint Working group meetings.

These interregional meetings (workshops and seminars) aim at reviewing and analyzing the situation of uprooted people in the region, inform of current issues, gain experience, learn from each other, share newly acquired knowledge with other organizations working with and concerned in refugee issues, as well as identify priorities, propose an action plan to MECC and affiliated bodies to bring change.

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<sup>2</sup> Aram I Catholicos, Keshishian, “*In Search of Ecumenical Vision*” , Antelias 2002

### **III- Human Resources Development**

Training of human resources in specifically Prison Ministry in different aspects of prison management, in different sectors of national institutions.

Training of Human Resources in Prison Ministry workshops focus on the promotion and development of the concept of Restorative Justice with relevant government structures, Human Rights institute, churches and civil society members, to promote the concept of change in the national institutions, in the system of justice at juridical, church and detention centers' level. The development of human resources and development of culture of justice in our society is crucial in the promotion of the fundamental concept of management system of prisons and in the treatment of prisoners, in providing information on measures of International Human Rights for prisoners, raising awareness in the prison staff of the role they have in defending the human rights of prisoners and practical information to implement them in everyday life. Specialized prison ministry workshops are organized to persons working in and with prisons, government officials, parliamentarians accountable for prisons, officials working with ministry of Justice, lawyers, judges, prison directors, police, Interior Security Forces and the General Security personnel.

### **IV- Ongoing projects**

#### **1. Direct Assistance to refugees through UNHCR Partnership program.**

Financial, material, legal and social assistance to recognized refugees through MECC/UNCHR partnership program.

As the implementing partner to UNHCR, now for more than 34 years and with the financial assistance of yearly allocated budget, the Unit on Diakonia & Social Justice through its SRDM program provides human development assistance, counseling sessions, home visits and visits to detainees in "detention centers" and prisons, educational and medical support, vocational training to refugees residing in Lebanon through UNHCR program is implemented. (See Annex B-1 in DSJ Activity report Jan – Sept 2008)

#### **2. Support to Churches Refugee Projects.**

Diakonia and Social Justice focus areas serve member churches to actively and concretely involve on removing the unjust social structures, challenging to rise above the narrow confines of individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity. Thus, through its activity programs, it is in service of member churches to actively involve in peoples' struggle for self-realization, self-reliance, renewal, development and liberation, accomplishing MECC's mission in "struggling against injustices and transforming the cosmos in all its dimensions, structures and manifestations"<sup>3</sup> through its ongoing projects:

##### **3. Our Lady Dispensary**

##### **4. Assistance to migrants in Lebanon – Philemon Project**

##### **5. Assistance to Sudanese in Egypt – St. Charles Lwanga**

##### **6. Ecumenical Primary Health Care – Arbaa Wa Nuss**

##### **7. Assistance to refugee Mothers and New born infants**

##### **8. Repatriation of migrant workers**

##### **9. Gulf Liaison office**

*(See the annex B, 3 -9 of the Unit on Diakonia and Social Justice Activity report January –September 2008)*

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<sup>3</sup> The Pacific Journal of Theology: " *Risking to be with the Uprooted People*" No 18, 1997

## **Are the financial resources Available for the program sufficient?**

Yes. The Unit's financial resources available through WCC partnership, Finn Church Aid, Global Ministries and World Lutheran Fund are sufficient for the project to go on. The Unit is capable of securing its administrative costs duly and entirely. The deficit that is often indicated in the Unit's financial analysis is due to the additional administrative costs incurred on it by MECC deficient Units lacking incomes, meaning that the Unit on Diakonia and Social Justice shares the burden of MECC administrative expenses, diakonia in its true sense.

## **Limitations and Constraints**

Limitations and constraints of the program do not stem only from administrative limitations, neither from lack of financial resources. The limitations stem from the solidified minds and hearts of the people, from lack of culture for tolerance and xenophobic traditions in the social political and economic structures of our societies, starting from the very immediate circles of MECC that breach the efforts of the Unit to better and efficiently actualize its objectives and projects. The constraints are summarized into three main sectors:

- a- Participation of the Churches. Participation and involvement of the churches in migration and refugee issues are unfortunately nominal and passive, churches are not deeply concerned or involved in being the church of the stranger. Their presence to program's activities and involvement in migration issues are very passive. Moreover, as churches represent different communities, they have different political views and perspectives towards migration issues and refugees and therefore they do not have a unified voice in what regards ratification of refugee or migrants conventions and therefore they are silent to the many revolting situations and issues. It is imperative that churches resume a more powerful presence in the policy debates on migration and provide the authorities with alternative hopes for the future of their country, supporting the advocacy projects of the Unit.
- b- Advocacy limitations. As of the major area of work for the Unit is advocacy, advocacy for ratification of the refugee conventions or Migrants rights conventions or access to detention centers, or lobby for the prisons to operate under the ministry of Justice (instead of the ministry of Interior), the Unit is constantly confronted with pushing the door against, while governments are closing it hard, as ratification of refugee conventions, or ratification of migrants rights are political issues, needing resolving of internal home affairs of the government which involves political debate and decision making, a long and difficult process of change which can only be achieved through resolving regional and national political conflicts, through dialogue with the authorities, through the ratification of and implementation of Human Rights Conventions.
- c- The third constraint is the regional situation. Sociopolitical and economic situation in the region is characterized by persistent tensions due to the prolonged war in Iraq, Israeli – Palestinian conflicts, and lack of peace processes, Palestinian Refugee presence, and now Iraqi refugees in the region, poverty, unemployment, the exodus of migrant economic workers from Asia to the Middle East and the closing doors policies of Europe and Northern countries towards migration movements. Consequently, with the growing number of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in the region, the absence of refugee conventions and working permissions, lack of legal, transparent, right based instruments for labor migration, corruption of justice and penal system, non transparent and non-democratic practices, non-implementation of law in the host countries, make of the asylum seekers unwelcome foreigners, who end up in detention, arrests, exploitations, abuse and warehoused situations.

Thus migrants, throughout the M.E. encounter severe hardships, hostility, prejudice, racism and Xenophobia, and therefore advocacy and awareness raising activities of DSJ are confronted with and hindered by national interests, regional political relations and economic development prospects of Lebanon and the concerned countries.

## **The threats that can affect DSJ program, How to avoid them?**

The greatest threat that can affect the program is the ignorance of the complexity and interrelatedness, consequences and emergence of global issues from migration and the lack of response to these needs. , i.e. the need for diakonal program.

Churches are more and more challenged by the phenomenon of migration, cultural pluralism, which is threatening all societies as consequence of globalization, the push and pull factors, catastrophes emerging from migration: poverty, refugee camps and detention, trafficking, slavery and new labor detention houses.

Living together and accepting each other is enforced on every society, meaning that churches are challenged to look introspectively and reevaluate their mission as the church of the stranger, while in reality, churches are confronted with financial limitations, and they often question the importance of the diakonia and social Justice issues in a narrow perspective of material and financial assistance to refugees and migrants and refer to it as giving alms to the poor and the stranger which they might think not within the mandate of MECC. It is expected that Churches are grown aware of the global dimension of migration and theological implications of Diakonia as the mission of God on earth. It is expected that churches resume a more powerful presence in the international and national political arena, and have a collective response to these issues and provide hope to the youth. Churches are expected to provide alternatives and new vision in the political disputes, internal conflicts and on the decisions of their countries; they are **the** essential partners for policy formulation on these matters. To ignore this, is to encourage xenophobia, racial discrimination, and even death.

## **Mechanisms to overcome difficulties in the coming four years**

The difficulties mentioned above are not easy to overcome overnight, they involve policy debates, dialogue, institutional changes, change of mentality and huge sums of money for advocacy and conscientization, they need Churches to develop a new philosophy towards their mission as the church of the stranger and respond to the need of the refugees and migrant workers more responsibly.

Churches should be actively involved in taking unified stand to press governments in their obligation to implement Human Rights Laws and monitor performance.

While in advocating the rights of the migrants and refugees together with churches NGOs and civil societies the Unit on Diakonia & Social Justice should continue to:

- Advocate for the rights of migrants and ratification of UN Convention on Migrant rights, raise awareness in the national authorities and the public towards a more humane response and better management of the detention centers, prisons, and warehoused situations.
- Continue to organize workshops, seminars, produce awareness raising material (human rights kits, books and articles).
- Pursue the rehabilitation & reintegration of migrant and local prisoners.
- Promote the concept of change in juridical system at government levels.
- Inform and conscientize the public of issues and situations related to the lives of the uprooted: detention, warehousing, policy changes and new trends in policy debates.

The Unit on Diakonia and Social Justice has the huge potential and capability of initiating other programs stemming from migration issues, issues related to trafficking of humans, child labor, migrant workers, labor camps and detention. The Unit has not plunged into the research of these issues comprehensively, as it lacks personnel, means and the green light from the General Administration or the General Assembly to approve the initiation of such projects, the efforts remain shy and consequently less aggressive.

## **Goals of the Unit**

The goal of MECC Unit on Diakonia & Social Justice program is to improve the quality of life, the skills and the performance of the churches in carrying their ministries, of individuals, government officials and civil society members, to get involved in this ministry of the uprooted, to pressurize legal systems to treat more humanely and to be able to respond to many needs and issues of migrants from: asylum seeking, to resettlement, protection, and help remove unjust patterns of exploitation, and uphold the rights and dignity of human person.

The Unit has the mandate to foster the creation of a society where all peoples of the planet enjoy the gifts of God created for all in the spirit of love, justice and equality.

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