

## **Plenary session IV: Strategies and Paths for the Struggle Against Israeli Apartheid**

**Title: Role of Civil Society organisations and youth movements around the world in combating the Israeli apartheid regime**

**By Marie Crawley**

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### **Introduction**

In Ireland, we recently commemorated an action carried out 35 years ago by a group of 7 ordinary people known as the *'Dunnes Stores strikers'*. These supermarket workers decided they would no longer handle South African fruit. They would not handle the fruits of apartheid and went on a strike action which galvanised civil society and ultimately resulted in the Irish Government formally adopting a policy to boycott South African produce. This was the first complete ban of South African imports by a Western government.

Change – led by civil society - is possible.

My input today is on the role of civil society organisations and youth movements in combating the Israeli apartheid regime. Because of the multiplicity of strategies and tactics which could, and are, being employed by both dedicated pro-Palestinian, generic civil society organisations and youth movements across the globe I will focus on a framework that we, as a civil society organisation, applied to introducing ground-breaking legislation in Ireland, the learning from which can be transferred into effective mobilisation against Israeli apartheid.

### **Background**

Ten years ago, Sadaka – the Ireland Palestine Alliance was formed to mobilise support in Ireland for the freedom and rights of the Palestinian people. Since 2009, we have worked towards securing a ban on the importation of goods from illegal settlements and having considered and exhausted other options, we began work on this particular phase of the Occupied Territories Bill in 2016.

The starting point on the development of this Bill was to address the only vulnerability of Israel. Israel is strategic, focused and has an extraordinary publicity machine with widespread influence in most countries. It has powerful allies and apparently limitless resources. So, what is its vulnerability? It breaks the law. Israel's vulnerability is that it is in flagrant breach of international law on a daily and persistent basis.

However, we also know that international law is limited in and of itself. There is no court, no punitive measures. It is a relatively blunt instrument. But it is an instrument at our disposal nonetheless, one which establishes an internationally agreed framework and applies a standard which nation states are politically obliged, if not legally mandated, to adhere to. In the case of the Occupied Territories Bill, it provided us with the framework within which we could draft domestic legislation - a tangible legislative sanction - around which we were able to design a targeted political campaign.

The Occupied Territories Bill, if and when enacted, will ban the import of goods from illegal Israeli settlements into Ireland. It has already passed through the Upper House of the Irish Parliament and made global history by doing so. It is currently progressing through the Lower House and has passed the first crucial stage. If enacted, we believe the Bill will send a strong message to the state of Israel that it can no longer breach international law with impunity. The methodology we used provides a useful template from which we can design strategies to address Israeli apartheid.

### **Campaign Strategy**

In initiating the legislation, our campaign strategy was based on four key components:

1. Involvement of legal personnel who drafted robust domestic legislation firmly based on international law;
2. Clarity and simplicity of message. "Settlements are a war crime. In trading with them we are complicit in those war crimes." It's a simple message that's difficult to object to;
3. Location of the campaign at the heart of mainstream civil society and its mobilisation to influence political leaders;

4. Creation of a coalition of allies through engagement with a range of key players and stakeholders (domestic and internationally);

For the purposes of today, I will talk us through this last component in detail - how we created a coalition of allies - and describe how this engagement – this team - has been central to the success of this initiative.

### **Building the Coalition of Allies**

The careful and strategic identification of allies is critical in all campaign designs. Our coalition of global and domestic allies began with Sadaka, evolved into a small core team in Ireland and organically evolved into a global web of experts and stakeholders, all of whom have played a distinct and critical role.

1. **Mainstream NGOs in Ireland.** Mainstream and highly respected NGOs and trade unions who work to a broader agenda of social justice, inequality and international development form the core strategy team for this legislation. Their involvement has been crucial in locating the issue of advocacy on Palestine away from dedicated pro-Palestinian organisations like ourselves into the centre of mainstream society. Those of us who lead civil society organisations exclusively dedicated to the achievement of Palestinian rights have a responsibility to ensure that the Palestinian cause is not perceived as a marginal issue, is not seen as an issue of the 'left', is not 'owned' by any particular sector but located at the heart of mainstream society. For us, that sometimes includes tactically stepping back to enable mainstream NGOs to be the public face of the campaign.
2. **Members of the Legislature/Parliament.** Civil society organisations are by definition limited in what can be achieved at a political level. Regardless of the merits of our case or the strength of our convictions, without political allies who will affect policy or legislative change, there will be little or no tangible political outcome to our work. Our role is to ensure that our elected representatives are informed on the issues, well briefed with succinct evidence, are supported and thanked when they act constructively and respectfully challenged when they do not. Many years of advocacy work by Sadaka and others, has helped create the political environment in which progression of this

legislation was possible. As a consequence, its proposal was not viewed as a radical move, but a logical progression from previous advocacy work which had generated multiple parliamentary debates and policy statements on the issue.

Identification of the most appropriate and effective political allies to lead on taking the taking the legislation through parliament was crucial. The political representatives we approached to lead on this needed to command respect on a cross party basis and across the political spectrum, to be perceived as non-threatening and non-partisan, to be highly committed to the political objective, and they needed to have the political and personal strength to withstand intense Israeli and US pressure. We have no doubt but that without the dedication and commitment of the Independent Senator and the political party who are taking the OT Bill through the Houses of Parliament – it would remain as an abstract idea with great potential.

Encouraging these political leaders to travel to Palestine to see the situation for themselves has been a critical success factor in securing and retaining their engagement. As importantly, their witness evidence now adds authority and legitimacy to their political stance.

3. **The General Public-** Key to progress in the campaign has been and continues to be, the ordinary citizens of Ireland galvanising support in every domain of Irish life. This is one of the core strengths of civil society organisations. Targeted campaigns with tangible outcomes provide platforms for the engagement of individual citizens, angered by the actions of the Israeli State and the inaction of their Governments. We mobilised people through social media, micro-marketing, events and established databases of supports. The types of actions we requested were relatively small, but collectively, they are powerful. For example, in the past few weeks, 6500 postcards from the electorate across the country have been sent to one political party.
4. **Human Rights Witnesses.** While the context of the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention, the Rome Statute and other implements of international law provided us with the legal framework for the legislation, it is not breaches of these in themselves which stimulate civil society into action. Ireland, like many countries, has a strong and vibrant network of people

who have lived in the West Bank as human rights witnesses. These are not people who talk the language of international law in mobilising others into action— they are people who have multiple stories of families being evicted from their homes, homes being demolished, of olive harvests being destroyed, of families living with the constant threat of potentially lethal violence from settlers – they tell the human story of settlements. They basically recount the devastating human cost of Israel’s brutal settlement plan – and that is what mobilises civil society.

5. **Palestinian Civil Society Organisations.** Our civil society partner organisations in Palestine have been key allies and must be core to any effective strategy on dismantling apartheid. They not only add moral authority to our objective through their endorsement and reassurance that Palestinian civil society is behind the proposed legislation, they provide substantial practical assistance in creating direct access to Palestinian society. They have been the conduit from Irish civil society to Palestinian civil society – *that* has been essential - and *they* have been amazing! No organisation working for justice in Palestine can hope to be effective without partners in the country itself.
6. **Palestinian Political Leaders.** Leaders of all segments of the Palestinian people play a role. Those in Palestine travelled to Ireland to meet with our political representatives; the Mission in Ireland is a constant and essential ally and Palestinian leaders in the Knesset advocated in support of the enactment of the legislation.
7. **International Leaders of Influence.** Insights and analysis from key political players in the international arena have served as crucial interventions. They provide context, perspective, insights into international thinking and reassurance that action by an individual nation state is not only the *right* course of action – it is the *only* course of action which will change the current trajectory.
8. **Supportive Israelis.** Israelis who are advocates for justice for Palestine have an important role to play as did white South Africans in dismantling apartheid in South Africa. They are the unexpected voices, the voices that jolt the politically neutral to reflect on what must be so wrong as to engage and mobilise people we would expect to

be naturally aligned with Israel. In the case of the OT Bill, interventions from Israeli supporters of the legislation have been game-changers.

9. **Celebrity endorsement.** Part of the challenge for civil society organisations is to mobilise a population into awareness and action. It is easy to preach to the converted, more challenging to engage the politically dis-interested or disaffected. One of the ways we can achieve this is through endorsement from sources outside the political arena. A celebrity culture, a young generation inextricably engaged with social media, and media focus on short, succinct and primarily visual messaging present us with new challenges in political advocacy. Roger Waters of Pink Floyd produced a short video for Sadaka – urging political parties to support the Bill. In the weeks preceding the first major vote on the Bill, every mainstream media outlet which covered the story, included that video.
10. **Team of Legal Experts.** A working group comprising experts from around the EU is engaged in a highly rigorous process of reviewing the Bill in absolute minutiae – to ensure it will not only withstand the rigour of scrutiny within the Irish legislature but will withstand the legal challenge which will inevitably emerge at an EU level. Their role is vital.
11. **Funders.** Finally there are those who provided financial assistance at key points in time. Most of our work is as volunteers - this is challenging given the formidable task – those who have invested in us have played a highly significant role in progressing this legislation.

### **Concluding Comments**

As civil society organisations, our role is to harness and channel the strength of feeling of ordinary citizens regarding Israel's colonial apartheid regime, to hold our governments to account for their responsibilities under international law and to marry those two dimensions.

Sadaka drafted the current inception of the OT Bill in 2016. In taking it forward, we knew we were taking a risk, because a defeat at any point in this legislative process is effectively a victory for Israel or will certainly be packaged as such. But, we are at a point where actions,

sometimes with calculated risks, need to be taken. Words of condemnation do not change a single fact of life for Palestinians.

Sadaka's learning in taking forward the OT Bill is fully consistent with the aim of this conference in creating a global coalition. No one organisation or sector can possibly be successful if acting alone. Our efficacy will lie in our ability to both assume leadership and create a strong and effective coalition of well chosen partners.

In conclusion, whether it's at the level of the individual taking an action such as the supermarket workers referred to at the outset - or a dedicated coordinated strategy such as the one I have partially described - not only has civil society a role to play in dismantling Israeli apartheid, we have an absolute responsibility to take a pro-active determined role in ending one of the greatest political injustices of our time.

Marie Crawley

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