

The Approach to Multiculturalism in Conflicts

Slide 1 - Opening remarks

Mr. Gabriel S. Savino and Mr. Jorge A. Henn, Associate Ombudsmen of the Province of Santa Fé, Mr. Keursly Concición, Ombudsman of Curaçao, distinguished guests. I am delighted to have been given this opportunity to address this important conference and to share with you the unique aspects of the work of the Ombudsman of Israel in its approach to multiculturalism in the handling of conflicts. I firmly believe in the importance of the exchange of knowledge and experience between ombuds institutions around the world in order to learn from one another and thus optimize work practices.

In addition to my position as Ombudsman, I also serve as State Comptroller auditing over 2,000 public bodies that receive public funding in Israel, including government ministries, local authorities and others.

Before I discuss the topic of multiculturalism in the handling of conflicts, I would like to address an urgent issue that has taken the forefront in recent months. I refer, of course, to the sudden and severe refugee crisis generated by the war in the Ukraine.

Over 27,000 new immigrants and refugees from the Ukraine have entered Israel since the outbreak of the war. The Office of the Ombudsman has taken, and continues to take, measures to reach out and assist this newly-created vulnerable community. Our Office has

conducted informational activities for new immigrants and refugees in absorption centres throughout the country.

In addition, our Office has been handling the complaints of people who have fled the war in the Ukraine. An example of one such complaint is that of an Israeli citizen who was living in the Ukraine with his Ukrainian wife. Upon the recent birth of their son, the complainant filed an application with the Israeli consulate in Kiev to register the child as an Israeli citizen - a prerequisite for receiving an Israeli passport for the child and then emigrating to Israel. However the procedure, which was in its final stages, was halted because of the need to vacate the consulate prior to the outbreak of the war. The complainant, who had succeeded in fleeing the Ukraine with his wife and son, contacted the Population and Immigration Authority in Israel and asked to complete the registration procedure, but the Authority requested different documents that the complainant was unable to provide due to the circumstances surrounding his flight from the Ukraine. Following the intervention of our office, the Authority spoke with the Consul who received the request and consequently consented to register the child, on the basis of the documentation at the complainant's disposal at that time.

Slide 2 - Introduction

And now to the approach of the Office of the Ombudsman of Israel to multiculturalism in the handling of conflicts.

I am proud to belong to a state that boasts a rich variety of ethnicities, thus enjoying exceptional cultural wealth.

Israeli society is extremely diverse, comprising multifarious ethnic groups. About 75% of the country's citizens are Jews and some 20% Arabs. The Arab community comprises 10% Christians, 8% Druze and 82% Muslims (14% of the Arab Muslims in Israel are Bedouin) - each of the communities have their own cultures, customs and value systems.

I should point out that the Jewish population comprises citizens who immigrated to Israel from all over the world. Over the last few decades, for example, about a million Jewish immigrants have arrived from the former Soviet Union and some 90,000 from Ethiopia.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that within the different ethnic groups, the way in which people define themselves from a religious aspect covers a wide spectrum, and this can influence the needs and difficulties of that population. Within the Jewish population, for example, some 45% are secular, 33% traditional, 8% religious and 10% ultra-orthodox.

While the wide diversity in the community brings with it many blessings, it also poses numerous challenges - challenges emanating from differences in cultural and religious perspectives and even in the familial structure; language barriers; disparities in the degree of access to digital services and so on.

The Office of the Ombudsman receives complaints from all the ethnic groups making up Israeli society. These complaints relate to a variety of conflicts, in matters such as taxation, nuisances, violation of the individual's rights and health. The complaints are handled with the aim of assisting the complainants in exercising their rights.

The investigation of these complaints obligates taking into account the particular cultural customs of the ethnic group to which the complainant belongs.

This frequently poses a dilemma for the Ombudsman who is often required to bear in mind cultural norms that may contradict the law or the values of the majority of Israeli society.

Slide 3 - Challenges facing the Ombudsman in the investigation of complaints of people from different ethnic groups:

I will share with you a number of challenges facing the Office of the Ombudsman in the handling of complaints of members of different ethnic groups, and will provide examples of complaints investigated by the Office that illustrate the Office's approach to multiculturalism in conflicts.

(a) Challenges arising from differences in the familial structure

In one case, an Arab woman divorced her husband, and in accordance with the norms of her community, continued to live in the same compound as her former husband. This arrangement would normally

disqualify her from receiving a financial benefit from the National Insurance Institute of Israel. However, in light of the special circumstances, we helped her to receive the benefit.

(b) Challenges arising from different cultural perspectives

In another case, a man from the Bedouin community complained that his application for a work grant had been rejected by the Tax Authority on the grounds that he owned real estate that did not serve residential purposes, a prerequisite by law for receiving the grant. The complainant contended that the property concerned was a plot of land on which was a shack used by his family as their home. Following the investigation of the complaint, the Ombudsman determined that the decision to deny the complainant's eligibility for a work grant was inconsistent with the wording and goal of the law, which aims to increase the labour force in the economy and reduce social gaps. The Ombudsman accordingly informed the authority that on account of the special individual and personal circumstances of the case, the application for a work grant should be approved; the Tax Authority subsequently permitted him to apply for work grants.

(c) Challenges arising from language barriers

As I mentioned earlier, over the years many new immigrants have come to Israel from all corners of the world. Many of them do not speak the official language of Israel - Hebrew - fluently, which frequently leads to conflict with state bodies since the language barrier impedes their ability to communicate with the authorities.

The Office aims, where possible, to enable those turning to it to express themselves in the language with which they feel comfortable. We therefore made sure, first and foremost, to employ staff members who speak a variety of languages - Hebrew, Arabic, French, Spanish, English, Ukrainian, Amharic, Tigrinya and Russian. We make every effort to enable the complainant who has difficulty speaking Hebrew to converse with the staff worker who speaks their language; we also make it possible for every individual to write the complaint in their language and send it for translation into Hebrew by professional translators.

We have recently employed two Amharic-speaking lawyers. Following the dissemination of information by these lawyers among the community of former Ethiopians, rumour spread that there were Amharic-speaking lawyers in the Office who could receive complaints. Within no time, there was a surge in the number of complainants from this community, who came to our reception bureau and asked to speak specifically with the lawyers.

Of course, the need to overcome the language barrier is also important and relevant for the public bodies against which the complaints are filed.

An example of this is the complaint filed against a public housing company for requiring an Arabic-speaking tenant - the complainant - to sign a form written in Hebrew giving consent for an investigator from the company to come to her home. When the complainant refused to sign the form, her request for public housing was rejected on the grounds of lack of cooperation. Following the investigation of our office, the Ministry of

Construction and Housing decided that the consent form would from now on also be in Arabic. Furthermore, the complainant was permitted to refile her application for public housing. At a later stage, an investigator came to her house with a consent form in Arabic.

Another example is the case where the intervention of the Office of the Ombudsman led to the cancellation of the municipal debts of a woman who had emigrated from Ethiopia and was living under poor socio-economic conditions; the debts in question had increased since the woman had not handled them due to her difficulties with the Hebrew language.

(d) Challenges relating to the practice of different religious customs

The Office receives many complaints that reflect the challenges emanating from the co-existence of people who practice different religious customs. I will shortly give an example of such complaints when I talk about mediation.

(e) Difficulties emanating from disparities in access to technology (Covid 19)

I wish to point out that even during the Covid-19 crisis, the Office of the Ombudsman laid special emphasis on the investigation of complaints from different ethnic and religious groups. The ultra-

orthodox Jewish community, for example, does not use the internet or smartphones, a situation that poses difficulties that heightened during the Covid-19 crisis.

Within this context, we brought about the extension of the deadline for registering pupils for special education frameworks within the ultra-orthodox Jewish community, in cases where due to the Covid-19 crisis, kindergarten teachers who did not have a computer at home, had no access to a computer and were therefore unable to type in information about the children that they wished to recommend for placement in special education facilities.

We also assisted a non-citizen residents to register themselves in the government computerized system. This residents did not have an identity number and were therefore unable to register for a government financial aid programme, even though they paid taxes in Israel. Through our intervention, we enabled them to exercise their right to receive a financial benefit for his business following a decrease in income as a result of the coronavirus crisis.

Slide 4 - Methods for investigating culturally sensitive complaints

The sensitivity surrounding the various cultural customs of different ethnic and religious groups is also likely to influence the measures taken to handle conflicts. Over the years, the Office has been making

increasing use of **mediation**, in the handling of particularly sensitive complaints, including the complaints of different ethnic groups.

For example, the Office of the Ombudsman investigated a number of complaints about the volume of the muezzin calls coming from the mosques and the signals coming from the synagogues to mark the entrance of the Sabbath.

By means of mediation, we helped the parties involved - the citizen, representatives of the house of prayer and the local authority that is supposed to supervise the area, sometimes with the cooperation of the police - to reach agreements and develop direct and beneficial dialogue among themselves.

On-site inspections are also an important means for resolving conflicts, particularly where they relate to ethnic groups living in the periphery. This means enables the investigator to acquire an understanding of complex situations and is thus suitable for the investigation of complaints of ethnic minorities. For example, following the complaint of an Arab citizen, I visited the city of Nazareth, together with the staff members investigating the complaint. In another case, I visited a Bedouin settlement in the south of the country. These visits contributed both to the investigation of the specific complaint and to strengthening the trust of the locals in the Ombudsman.

Slide 5 - Enhancement of access to the Office for a variety of populations

We take extensive measures to increase the accessibility of the Office of the Ombudsman to the public, emphasizing different communities, including ethnic minorities. These measures include the opening of regional branch offices in the periphery, in places where the majority of the minority groups live. They also include the provision of services in a variety of languages, such as Arabic, Russian, Amharic and English.

In its publications, our Office takes into account the characteristics of the different populations and looks for appropriate ways of disseminating information about its activities and the service it provides.

To this end, our Office has taken pains to publish and distribute information pamphlets relating to the service and assistance that it provides in five different languages - Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, Amharic and English. These pamphlets have also been distributed to social organizations that assist the different communities.

Our Office also initiated a publicity campaign in Arabic that included press releases and interviews with staff of the Office in the media (radio and television interviews, articles in the written press) in order to reach out to the Arab population of Israel.

Our Office organizes informational activities in the social and geographical periphery of Israel via welfare bureaus in the local authorities and other relevant bodies.

Let me also tell you about a project that the Office of the Ombudsman called "**The Ombudsman in the Community**". This project involves unique cooperation between the Office of the Ombudsman and various social organizations throughout the country that deal with the exercising of rights.

In the framework of this project, a team of lawyers from the Office receives complainants in branches of bodies that deal with the exercising of rights and help people who have turned to those organizations to exercise their rights - rights that have been violated by state authorities (including government ministries, local authorities and government corporations). This project focusses on the populations living in the social and geographic periphery, including the nuclei of ethnic minorities in the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem, Nazareth and Um El Fahem.

Slide 6 - The Office of the Ombudsman sets a personal example by integrating employees from diverse populations

A significant part of the success of the Office of the Ombudsman in assisting the diverse populations derives from its rich fabric of staff members who come from all sectors of Israeli society. The reason for

this, among other things, is that priority is given to employing staff members from populations that are underrepresented in Israeli public service. This policy is based on an understanding of the importance of diversity in the Office and on the belief that as Ombudsman we must set a personal example.

In order to promote diversity and tolerance, a senior staff member of our Office serves as Commissioner for Equality and Employment Diversity of Human Capital and Equality for Persons with Disabilities.

Furthermore, following a conference on multiculturalism that was organized by the Office of the Ombudsman for its staff, the Office recently organized a workshop on the subject of multiculturalism, in order to recognize the challenges and give the staff members tools for investigating complaints and communicating with complainants from different backgrounds; while paying attention to multicultural aspects of Israeli society and cultural sensitivity. No less important, we desire to raise the staff's awareness to their own potential cultural biases, in order to nullify the influence of these biases on the investigation of complaints.

Last year an Arab-language course was launched for the staff of the Office and the response was overwhelming. We also held an exhibition of the works of artists of Ethiopian origin in the lobby of the Office.

Summary and closing remarks

To summarize, Israel is a multi-cultural state and as such, the Office of the Ombudsman that I head, directed by Dr. Esther Ben-Haim and her dedicated staff, is obligated to take various innovative actions to enhance the access of the multifarious populations, including different ethnic groups, to the services that we provide. It also obligates adapting work methods and decision-making to the diverse communities in Israeli society, according to the culture and customs peculiar to them.

By enhancing the tools adopted by us in the handling of complaints, we serve not only the special populations but also the public at large.

The duty to take care of others was imposed upon us by the Old Testament in the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 19, Verse 18, which ordains - "Love thy Neighbor as Thyself", a commandment considered a fundamental decree of Judaism, as in other religions.

As Ombudsman, I believe that it is our task not only to solve the problems of people whose ability to exercise their rights is restricted by language barriers or cultural misunderstandings, but also to promote tolerance and acceptance within the public at large; to appreciate the beauty of multiculturalism in society and protect its special texture. On this subject, I consider peer learning between Ombudsmen from across the globe to be of great importance.

I wish to thank the organizers of this conference and all the participants and to express my hopes for good health for all the people of the world.

Thank you for your attention!