

**Asfari Institute of Civil Society and Citizenship**  
**United Against Inhumanity Initiative**  
Consultation Report

On the 14th March 2018 the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship hosted a consultation at the American University of Beirut initiated by **Norah Niland** and **Antonio Domini** on "*United Against Inhumanity*". The aim of the consultation was to review the rationale and objectives of UAI and gather the reactions and feedback from professionals and academics coming from various sectors and organizations of the humanitarian field in the Arab region.

This report provides a brief description of the United Against Inhumanity initiative, then gives an overview of the discussions held during the consultation.

### **1. Introduction to "United Against Inhumanity"**

The authors of the UAI, Mrs. Niland and Mr. Domini who both have substantial humanitarian and academic experience, presented UAI as an emerging project born from a shared sense of indignation and outrage in the face of widespread inhumanity experienced by civilians across the world. Its aim is to address the most pressing humanitarian issues through collective action and global citizen mobilization to pressure UN member states to uphold their responsibilities, and demand the protection of civilians in conflict zones as well as refugees looking for safety. In response to the failure of the UN in dealing with inhumanity across the world, alternatives must be explored. They put forward a number of suggestions:

- a) Push forward the process initiated by France, asking the five permanent members on the UNSC not to use their veto in the UN Security Council in cases of mass atrocities.
- b) Hold perpetrators of atrocities to account by drawing attention and exposing them through citizen mobilization.
- c) Create an independent **International Humanitarian Watch (IHW)**, and develop an **Inhumanity Index** to track and record instances of violations of human rights, identify the key violators and expose them publicly.

A series of consultations have been held across the world in order to get a sense of what should be done, and involve a wide network of individuals, civil society actors, professionals and academics in shaping the project. The aim of each regional consultation is to listen to the participant's perspectives on this initiative, to discuss its objectives and feasibility, and to establish a regional network for participants, and which will be useful at a later stage.

### **2. Overview of Consultation**

Participants discussed the current humanitarian situation, in particular in the MENA region, and their opinions on the UAI. The discussion covered several themes, briefly reported below. These topics do not necessarily follow the order in which they were discussed during the consultation. The workshop was followed by a collegial lunch to allow bilateral discussions.

- **The hierarchy of suffering and atrocities.** Participants expressed concerns over the dangers of relying on comparisons and classifications of levels of suffering in humanitarian work, and warned that UAI should be wary of it. UAI agreed that it was incorrect and inappropriate to rank suffering, and that explaining the human cost of war was very difficult. But that an index was needed.
- **Politics and the root causes of conflict.** Several participants were adamant that despite "politics" being treated as a dirty word, and so often avoided by humanitarian experts who must uphold their principles of impartiality, a political approach (not to be confused with political agenda) is necessary to tackle root causes and understand human rights violations, due to the inherently political nature of conflict. To this, UAI representatives asked whether it was really the role of humanitarians to address the political dimensions of conflict and its root causes. Antonio Domini argued that impartiality was the only way if they wanted

results, and that personal opinions on politics should be kept separated from a humanitarian's responsibilities.

- **Impartiality.** Some concerns were expressed over UAI's ability to remain truly impartial, given that initiatives can easily be politicized, despite their claims of impartiality. UAI agreed that independence was crucial, and so far had preserved it by not going to states, or to big organizations. The few funds raised come from private donors and remain limited at present. The question is whether it is possible to set up a global observatory and index which will be perceived as independent. Mrs. Niland added that from her experience in dealing with different stakeholders, it takes work and dedication to remain equidistant between warring parties and to be perceived as impartial but it is not impossible.
- **The politicization of language.** Definitions of war crimes, terrorism, perpetrators are all heavily politicized. The hierarchy of truth means that higher powers determine the narrative of who the perpetrators are. This is problematic for the "Inhumanity Index", because all information can be manipulated and politicized. Providing a counter narrative is far from being an easy endeavour, as there will always be alternative truth. The idea that one truth can be established have proved its limits decades ago.
- **United Nations and world order.** Some participants expressed disillusionment with the UN as the reflection of a corrupt world order causing the suffering of millions. They were concerned that if UAI wants to become a part of the same pool as existing humanitarian organizations, it would inevitably fall in the same cycle of corruption and politicization that paralyzes the UN and global power structures. Mr. Domini argued that although there was consensus over the need to reform the UN, it wasn't going to happen in our lifetime, so the focus should remain on accessible and achievable alternatives.
- **Chronic suffering.** Some participants also advocated for the need to adopt a broader outlook, and tackle the root causes of chronic suffering in order to bring about structural and long term changes, rather than sticking to the narrow focus of counting victims. Mrs. Niland said that the question of "Do you go broad or do you go narrow?" had been asked and discussed many times. Mr. Domini added that choices had to be made as to where they can be of most help in countering inhumanity, and in order to get results, it is necessary to start narrow, and focus on suffering triggered by violations of human rights laws, and migration laws as a niche, and not extend to chronic suffering. Over time, it will be possible to increase people's awareness of how the system is set up against them, and therefore broaden the agenda.
- **The issue of Western-Centricity.** Mrs. Niland asked for non-Western-centric contributions to avoid the trap of Western-centricity. Participants agreed that checking western bias was useful, that they still felt that the system was geared against them, and that the humanitarian discourse wasn't really impartial, as it is the way the western world articulates it's view of the world. Definitions of inhumanity must be explored, and consensus on the diagnosis should not be assumed. A call to unite must find ways of linking up the shared humanity of people despite the differences in race, nationalities, class etc., while at the same time addressing our differences. Some pointed out the absence of grassroots level organizations, and argued that it would benefit the initiative to gather local organizations.
- **The politics of NGOs.** Participants shared their experiences as Aid or International law experts who are often not free to speak up, to preserve status and ability to operate. Due to donor constraints and the need to preserve their relations with the local authorities, people and organizations often don't criticise and make an analysis of the inadequacy of the system they are working within in order not to compromise their ability to help the civilian population. There is added value in the UAI initiative by verifying and spreading information about mandated organizations that do harm because they want to maintain their access. Since people speaking on behalf of organizations always have agendas, and donors to respect, and are less free to speak up, there must be a platform for civilian survivors to speak up louder, to share stories, information, and points of view.