

Experiences in Africa and Problem Areas from IHH's Perspective

We are living in a world today where income inequality is constantly on the rise. **The eight richest people in the world control as much wealth as one half of the global population.** This system that keeps promoting a sense of false security survives by creating impoverished masses. One of the biggest victims of this situation is, without doubt, the continent of Africa. Colonized for centuries, the riches of this continent were looted and the people inhabiting it were humiliated and enslaved. Not much has changed since. Only some elite families and a feeble middle class emerged after the 1960s.

Seven out of 10 countries with the highest inequality in income distribution are located in Africa. A great portion of the African population continues to live on the verge of what has been named extreme poverty. Unfortunately, these segments of society have very limited access to basic services, such as education and healthcare. According to the most optimistic estimations, **330 million people across Africa live on the verge of extreme poverty.** In unstable countries such as Somalia, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the problem of poverty is deeply rooted in rural society.

This is why **IHH has been working in African countries for the past 20 years.** In doing so, as long as there is a need, we do our best to assure equal treatment of both Muslims and non-Muslims without distinction of any kind. We are conducting work in Africa **as part of our vision of brotherhood**, one of our moral obligations, and a responsibility assigned to us by our faith. For we are of the conviction that our faith commands us to be in solidarity with our brothers without distinction of location, skin color, religion, or sect.

It is a known fact that there are unique necessities in each country and region in Africa and that relevant aid items change accordingly. The northern regions of Africa are predominantly Muslim countries where the humanitarian needs seem to be related mostly to poverty resulting from income inequality. Thanks to the impact of Islamic culture, the cultures of mutual support and kinship contribute to solving many problems, and external support from aid agencies is usually needed only in extreme cases. On the other hand, the situation in Sub-Saharan countries is much more complicated. Even though the region has great potential in terms of mineral resources and geographic conditions, **poverty, underdevelopment, epidemics and bad governance** are the root causes of the humanitarian crises in this region.

As problems cannot be solved with help brought in from outside, it is of primary importance that the people of Africa manage to stand on their own feet. The only way to make this possible is through investment in education and cultivation of human resources. In connection with this, it has been revealed in the past 50-60 years that groups which look to and admire the West are of no use to these countries. In order for this mentality to change and Western colonialism to end, it is imperative to raise awareness and self-confidence in people. Undoubtedly, another fundamental thing to do is to surmount the health problems plaguing the region. **Hundreds of thousands of African children die every year because of unhealthy conditions.**

To mention a few concrete projects, for example only in the past year (2016) IHH carried out **154 different projects in 30 countries and three regions in Africa** concerning food security, education, protection, religion and culture. A budget of nearly **\$10 million** was spent on these projects within a year.

PROJECTS

We can divide IHH's activities in Africa **into two categories**. **The first involves emergency humanitarian aid necessary in situations caused by events such as droughts, civil wars and the second involves permanent development aid such as the construction of orphanages, schools, mosques, hospitals and clinics.** The first category consists of humanitarian aid provided generally by all aid agencies. However, the main area that distinguishes us from other agencies is the permanent development aid that we provide. As of now, **the number of universities, schools, orphanages, hospitals and mosques we have built across the continent is in the hundreds.** In addition to this, **our development projects aimed at vocational training and agriculture** play an important part. Meanwhile, **we contribute to raising awareness among young Africans and help them stand on their own feet through the books and reports we publish.** The **student associations** that we have found up until the

present will play an important part in the future of the continent by strengthening cooperation between alumni of Turkish institutions.

Our foundation has been active in the field of eye care in Africa since 2007. **Within the scope of the Africa Cataract Project, 712,112 individuals have undergone medical examinations, and 97,800 individuals have been operated on free of charge** in countries such as Niger, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone. There is ongoing work on the modernization of hospitals to strengthen the healthcare sector.

As part of our sponsorship system, our foundation caters to the needs of **89,095 orphans in 54 countries**. Furthermore, it has **32 orphanage complexes constructed in 11 countries**. Of the orphans hosted, **26,243 reside**

Clean water is of primary importance for a healthy life. Since its foundation, IHH has been realizing projects to give people access to clean water. Drilling water wells is an important part of these endeavors. Our projects have provided millions of people with access to clean water through the drilling of **6,089 water wells** in 33 countries located mostly in Africa. Among these projects, **36 deepwater wells in Central and Southern Somalia drilled in cooperation with the Islamic Development Bank** will meet an important need, despite functioning under difficult circumstances due to security concerns.

Besides this, IHH has constructed over a hundred mosques, madrasahs and schools. All the projects are run in an effort to improve quality of life for the people of Africa. As one would expect, certain difficulties arise when running these projects that require cooperation and coordination with various institutions.

COORDINATION

At IHH, we give importance to cooperation and coordination in the field of humanitarian relief. This, **we believe, improves productivity and the quality of projects**. For this reason, **we have never adopted a conservative attitude** towards an exchange of ideas or joint project development in accordance with our principles. We do not restrict our cooperation and coordination to involve only Turkish institutions, we also work with institutions from the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and the West. At IHH, we have communication links with all the organizations with which we cooperate, **especially the United Nations** and the **Organization of Islamic Cooperation**. In addition to being a member of the **United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs** since 2004, our foundation is a member of the **United Nations Special Liaison Mission in Syria**, of the **Humanitarian Assembly of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation**, and it is a **founding member** of the **Humanitarian Forum** located in the UK.

At IHH we work in coordination with **Turkish institutions, such as TIKA, AFAD, KIZILAY, DIYANET**, in addition to **working in coordination with NGOs especially from countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, South Africa, Japan, Norway, the UK, Denmark, Sudan, and Indonesia**.

People from different regions of the world face different types of misfortune and have different needs. This requires policies which are specific to each region. In this framework, the main objective of our relations with both international organizations and local institutions is to help pave the way for more humanitarian activity, as well as reach more people in need. In addition to this, considering the existence of other aid agencies like us, which sometimes end up in the same region as one another, **it is among our goals to prevent concentration of aid**, that is, to prevent aid pollution. Furthermore, one of the most basic aims of the cooperation between international NGOs is to **raise the quality of work by assuring a mutual sharing of experiences**. The experience we have may not be available, for example, to an Egyptian NGO, or the other way round. These kinds of international relations enhance the sharing of experiences as well as legislative alignment. Besides, our 25 years of experience has shown that **such relations with international and local institutions always strengthen local actors**.

In fact, initiatives in Turkey concerning Africa, for example, started for the first time in 1998. From that period on, we have always tried to stay **in contact with the bureaucratic circles in Ankara** in an effort to share our views on what Turkey could do in Africa with regard to humanitarian activity. For this reason, we believe that IHH's regional activities have played as much of a facilitating role in Turkey's globalization process as having the necessities of international conjuncture. **Therefore IHH plays an important part in**

promoting Turkey's humanitarian activities across the globe. As an internationally-recognized NGO, we organized the **first Conference on Africa** years ago and helped bring Africa to the agenda in Turkey when it was not a topic of discussion anywhere. In addition to this, **we have encouraged others to carry out fieldwork by sharing our experiences in the field with other NGOs and government institutions.** Thus, we have paved the way for cooperation between public institutions and NGOs.

It is possible to speak of a general harmony between public institutions and NGOs in Turkey. However, this does not necessarily mean that the two are always in unison. After all, we are dealing with two separate structures, one governmental and one non-governmental, **which have different priorities, as well as different methods**. In this sense, our humanitarian activity does not contradict Turkish foreign policy in many areas. However, in the case of Palestine for example, governmental relations and our take on the problem present differences. Again, despite finding common ground in our attitudes towards the Syrian case, there is no denying that we are of different opinions when it comes to humanitarian aid.

IHH's initiation of relations with Africa has contributed to raising awareness on the issue among the Turkish public. **The people of Turkey have become more familiar with the problems facing Africa thanks to many programs, campaigns and publications.** Furthermore, permanent institutions have been founded to carry on the relations that have been established with an increasing number of African students in recent years into the future. Tens of student unions have been founded so far to enhance civil relations with the people of many countries, and most importantly with African students. We have helped set up local **"Alumni from Turkey"** associations in many African countries. Students of African origin who have studied in Turkey and then returned to their countries not only continue their relationship with us through these local associations, but also contribute to the promotion of Turkey abroad. In addition to this, as a natural outcome of our humanitarian aid, the schools, hospitals and orphanages we have established in many African countries also play an important part in Turkish-African relations.

PROBLEM AREAS IN HUMANITARIAN AID

Political reactions can change from country to country. While some countries are happy to receive support from a foreign aid agency in solving the problems of their people, others may feel uncomfortable. This may result from the nature of the political regime in the country, its attitude toward Turkey, or the negative opinions they hold of IHH. Following the attack on the *Mavi Marmara*, the international Zionist lobby under Israel's control has tried its best to paint IHH as a terrorist organization through its initiatives in various countries. Some countries may take Israel's list of terrorist organizations seriously and take a stance against us.

However, not only is the number of such reactions at an official level very limited, but as far as people are concerned, they express satisfaction and support.

At the top of our list of problems is the **low number of qualified people** at a local level. Due to the scarcity of educational opportunities, we sometimes encounter difficulties in making the local civil society a desirable destination for the qualified people we can employ in our projects. This is why raising the number of qualified people is a top priority for IHH.

Likewise, the **inadequate institutional capacity** of those institutions we collaborate with creates the need for capacity building. This, in turn, means that things slow down while costs go up. If we consider the fact that civil society as a sector has been booming in Africa since the 90s, we can understand that NGOs as a sector are still in their infancy. We make efforts to surmount this obstacle by introducing the culture of charitable foundations, an important part of our culture, to Africa, and by providing capacity building training for these institutions.

The inadequate infrastructure in Sub-Saharan Africa translates into poor **transportation** facilities. Distances that would otherwise be covered in a short time take much more time to cover because of poor road conditions and the lack alternative modes of transportation. Our experiences in Africa have taught us the importance of planning and of creating alternative plans in advance.

Security continues to be a significant risk area for us. After all, many countries where we are active are experiencing either civil war or are in turmoil. It would be unfair to say that the whole of Africa is unsafe,

but one can say that the areas in which our activities concentrate pose security risks. It is not uncommon for our teams to work in life-threatening circumstances. Even though we do our best to take the necessary measures, at times unwanted situations arise.

Distrust towards foreigners, resulting from the bad legacy of European colonialism, has its effects on us as well. Familiarity with one another is necessary to overcome this distrust. Turkey's positive image and IHH's recognition around the world help us overcome this distrust.

*IHH President Bülent Yıldırım's speech delivered at the Congress on Health in Africa held in Istanbul between July 20-21, 2017.