

# SAMA FOR DEVELOPMENT

## THINGS CAN'T GO BACK TO HOW THEY WERE BEFORE 7 OCTOBER 2023

Based on an interview with Wadad al-Sabeh, founder and director of Sama Lil-Tanmiyah (SAMA for Development) in Saida, South Lebanon. Wadad studied social sciences and has worked as a social worker since 1997. She started volunteering at the age of 17. Wadad identifies as a women's rights activist, and her organisation has worked on gender justice issues.

"I feel that social work has chosen me, not the other way around," Wadad says. Even though she wanted to study journalism, she studied social sciences and found social work to be a good fit for her. "I have learnt a lot throughout my career. I started as a peer-to-peer facilitator in a reproductive health and family planning organisation, then I took on several positions as project coordinator and manager in local NGOs before I went on to work with international institutions and UN agencies. I've independently shaped both my personal and professional development. "My growth has been self-made," Wadad says.

When Wadad founded SAMA in 2009, it began as an initiative to provide education, protection, and development opportunities for the disenfranchised youth, particularly in South Lebanon. In addition, the organisation has conducted emergency responses several times, including operating and managing a shelter for internally displaced people in Saida during the Israeli war on Lebanon in September 2024. "The same day the war broke out, we held meetings at our emergency management office in Saida and launched the emergency response. "We had already planned for the possibility of a full-scale war, given all the indicators back then," Wadad says.

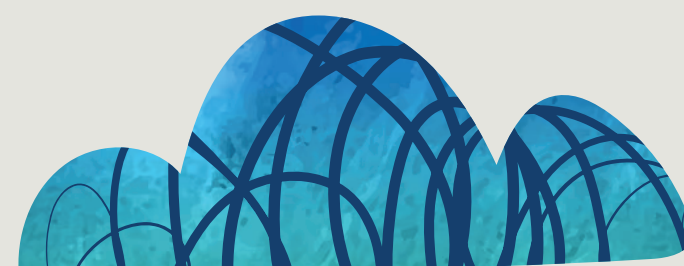
SAMA relies on fostering trust with local communities and authorities to conduct development and humanitarian work. "Wars bring a lot of suffering. But if you get through them, you realise that you have built strong and lasting trust-based relationships with community members and partners," Wadad says. Although SAMA didn't start as a relief agency, it has accumulated expertise in emergency response and aid provision out of a sense of responsibility and commitment towards society as a whole.

"We were on the ground during this war and during the Beirut port explosion in 2020 and when the armed fights broke out in Ain al-Helwe Palestinian camp in Saida in July 2023. In the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, we were part of the national emergency unit, and I was personally in charge of coordinating shelters."

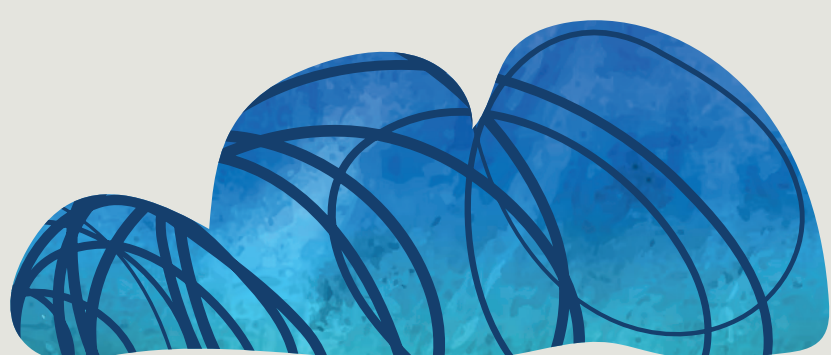
According to Wadad, the Lebanese government did not fail in efficiently rolling out the national emergency response plan. During the war, her organisation worked in full coordination with the South Governorate, the municipality of Abra, and the Ministry of Social Affairs. She considers that there were shortcomings in capacity and funding that caused delays in procurement and aid provision. Wadad found international agencies to also be slow because of their complex bureaucracy, while local initiatives tend to make faster decisions and enjoy greater flexibility when implementing plans. "Most employees of international organisations see their social work as a job. They finish office hours and leave. But those like us who work in local organisations do it to serve our communities," Wadad says.

Wadad is vocal about her support for the Palestinian cause and is deeply shaken by the genocide that Israel unleashed on Gaza. "The impunity granted to Israel and the complicity of the international community have made us reconsider international standards. We are now critically reassessing the agreements we once championed, reflecting on the systems we belonged to, and reconsidering funding from certain sources." There are many questions to grapple with when the crisis ends, according to Wadad, who believes that things must change to counter all the monstrosity that has been committed against the Palestinian and Lebanese people. "We shall not go back to political stances that we had before the genocide. The way things stand must change," she says.





Some local organisations in Palestine and elsewhere lost foreign funding because they refused to sign documents denouncing the resistance in Gaza and calling it a terrorist organisation. Other agencies suddenly stopped working in humanitarian relief and aid, or in documenting human rights violations, to avoid upsetting donors.



Wadad maintains that organisations need adequate funding to function effectively and meet community needs. “An organisation can’t function without covering its basic operational expenses; while volunteers can handle some tasks, effective programmes need funding,” Wadad says. She argues for broadening and multiplying funding

streams to guard against foreign agendas and conditional grants. “Putting all our eggs in one basket risks forcing us to compromise our political convictions and the welfare of our people,” she notes.

Even though Wadad feels limited in what she can do for the Palestinian people on an individual level, she believes in collective solidarity.

“As organisations, we can all stand by Palestinians who are strong and steadfast people, at least by expressing our support for them in petitions, statements and vocal denunciation of the genocide whenever and wherever we can”.

