

**Quarterly Progress Report:
OMEP Regional Partnership for Culture and Development (RPCD) Program**

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Submitted by: Christina Blumel

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The OMEP Regional Partnership for Culture and Development Program (RPCDP) was awarded as a cooperative agreement to AED on September 22, 2010. This is the 2nd quarterly report and covers the period from January 1 through March 31, 2011.

The purpose of the Program is to “support the dissemination of regional research on development issues, share best practices and lessons learned from international development programs, and provide a forum for knowledge sharing and intellectual innovation.”

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Overview of Events During the Second Quarter

Events in the region as well as those related to AED presented a complex set of challenges for progress during this quarter.

The Revolution

The revolution in Egypt which began in January affected the pace at which work could proceed. The Egyptian government effectively cut off both phone and Internet communication. Although this was re-established, Ms. Mariam Hanna and Ms. Iman Choucri worked on a limited basis for a period of time, due to the difficulties associated with day-to-day life during this tumultuous period. There was also a concern that they not take on any activity that involved travel around Cairo during this time given security concerns.

AED Status

The suspension of AED continued through this quarter, and the guidance from USAID provided in January regarding the need to wait on hiring, executing a lease and acquiring computers and office furniture remained in place. Rather than ask about specific interim actions, AED senior contracts staff and CEO Greg Niblett in March also included the RPCD Program in a group of cases in need of review by Maureen Shauket. Unfortunately, the AED Contracts department did not receive a response on RPCD at this time from AID/W to its request.

In March, AED announced its intention to sell assets to a new organization. An acquirer will be determined in May, and it is anticipated that all agreements and contracts will be *novated* by USAID to the new acquirer in June.

Overview of Progress During this Quarter

Despite these challenges, the Program was able to make steady progress in several areas outlined in the Start Plan sent in January. These include working on the Partnership Forum criteria, the web Portal, and work on recruitment.

- On January 8th an interim report on activities was submitted to Dr. Hassanein and Ms. Delaney, as well as a Start Plan to identify ways to continue working despite the restrictions related to the suspension. This was reviewed by Dr. Hassanein and returned with comments on January 19, 2011. This was then adopted as the guide for our work going forward. However, as noted in the report, the Revolution changed the ability of the Program to go forward with a kick-off meeting.
- An update on Portal progress was provided February 28th, and teleconferences in March with Dr. Hassanein focused on issues related to Portal development.
- On March 8th an additional update was provided with an overview of activity during the previous months. An additional teleconference with Dr. Hassanein and Ms. Delaney identified priority areas for website development and the desire of Missions to access research support, as well as the importance of moving ahead on the Partnership Forum.

Start Up Staffing

Staffing continues to be a concern, given the length of the restriction on hiring for the Program. At the time of the suspension in December, the staff for the Cairo office had been identified and interviews were underway for country coordinator staff.

Country Coordinators

These recruitment efforts continued in the last quarter, despite the continued hold on hiring. The goal was to have a ready pool of candidates should restrictions be lifted. To this end, AED staff with other projects in these countries were asked to use their contacts and networks to identify potential candidates. In addition, newspaper ads were taken out in Jordan in late December for the Iraq and Jordan positions. In Morocco, an ad was placed on the international development website Tanmia. Ads were also taken out in Yemen in January and in West Bank in February.

As a result, 513 resumes were screened since January 1. After a review of resumes by Dr. Blumel, interviews were scheduled with candidates in Jordan, West Bank, Morocco, Yemen and Lebanon. Interviews in Jordan included candidates for the Iraq coordinator position. In most cases, candidates were initially interviewed by Dr. Blumel, and subsequently interviewed by Ms. Hanna. These interviews were conducted by phone. Over 45 interviews have been conducted. As a result of these efforts, multiple candidates were identified for each position. In addition, a pool of resumes has been created. When the hiring restriction no longer applies, we will proceed to ask AED staff in other countries to conduct final face to face interviews.

Cairo Based Staffing

Given the events in the Egypt and the length of time since interviews for these positions were conducted, we anticipate the need to do a new set of interviews to identify candidates to replace that are no longer available. When the acquirer of AED assets is determined in May, the Program will then move forward to locate any additional candidates that are needed to fill positions. The reason to wait is

that we will then have further information to present to candidates concerning the acquirer as well as information on registration and other issues that would be part of the hiring process.

Partnership Forum

Development of Partnership Forum Criteria

One of the tasks for the quarter was to develop the Partnership Forum criteria. The following is a description the efforts involved.

One initial task was to collate and cross-reference the list of institutions provided by OMEP as well as those in the original technical proposal. In the majority of cases, there was considerable overlap between the two lists.

The next step was to consider the illustrative criteria presented in the proposal. An initial review resulted in separating the criteria into three groups. These groups capture three dimensions of research activity and organizational strength. The three dimensions are:

- *Organizational Depth and Vision*, which assesses different aspects of institutional strength;
- *Research Design and Analysis*, which assesses different aspects of research practice;
- *Supporting Competencies*, which assesses different approaches and underlying competencies that can support effective research.

The team (including short-term technical support from AED home office staff) identified which of these criteria would be used. Then formal definitions, a rationale for use, and suggested evidence that could be used for assessment were created for each criteria.

In addition, a scoring matrix was created with different values assigned to measure the degree to which criteria were met. Also included were non-scored criteria, including whether there is evidence of good financial and organizational practices. Information sources for this will include a review of an annual report (where available); a Lexis-Nexis search (Lexis-Nexis is a database of news reports); and any other supporting review, ranking material or other source that is specific to the country or the region that provides background information on institutions. Institutions will also be checked with available databases (USG and United Nations) that concerning terrorist activity.

Further Development and Testing of Criteria

In order to further develop and test the applicability of the criteria and to discover weaknesses in the scoring method ten Egyptian institutions were chosen as an initial sample group. The criteria were then used to assess the institutions using available information from the websites of these institutions.

This exercise revealed areas in which the description of each criteria needed to be strengthened and clarified with further revisions. In addition, the exercise also revealed additional types of information that could contribute to the assessment for each criteria.

This exercise also revealed gaps in information that exist from online sources. For example, staff credential information was not found on most sites. Also, many institutions did not post research papers in an electronic format, but rather publication lists. These lists may not include abstracts, so it was difficult to assess elements such as a research design or other aspects related to publications. Also, most institutions reviewed do not post an annual report or other descriptive information related to operations and business practices.

Online research is only a first step in assessing institutions. Site visits to talk with staff and to review material such as research papers and annual reports are also an important part of the screening process. In lieu of site visits, telephone conversations and requesting material for review would be an alternative option. However, knowing these gaps in information exist provides better preparation for conversations with staff at potential institutions, and will lead to common ways to approach asking institutions for this information.

Development of RPCD Portal

Significant progress was made on portal development during this period.

In January, the AED ITAC web team began the first steps towards Portal development, by taking an in-depth look at the requirements for the website, the audiences for the site, and the goals of the RPCD Program.

To identify a domain name, ITAC staff member Ms. Veronica Erb led a working group session to identify elements for the domain name. The result was a template that captures group consensus on the most important elements that should be embodied in a domain name, as they relate to the RPCD Program. These were a reference to the region as well as the overarching goals of the Program. A review by the team resulted in a list of three names, with the most popular choice being mena-partnership.info. This was subsequently approved by USAID. This domain name and the two runners up were purchased. The additional names will be set up to re-direct to the mena-partnership.info site.

In addition, Dr. Blumel worked with both Ms. Erb and Mr. Evan Case to develop outlines of the business processes that underlie use of different parts of the site. Ms. Hanna also provided a detailed list of pages that should be included related to the site. Ms. Erb then developed a template for the wireframes and overall sitemap she will create. These will be presented to Dr. Hassanein in the next quarter.

As a result of a teleconference with Dr. Hassanein and Ms. Delaney on March 8th, the web team prioritized the development of research request page that could be used by Missions to send in research requests.

Progress was reviewed in a March 22nd teleconference with Dr. Hassanein. At that time, the team and Dr. Hassanein were able to discuss in detail aspects of the digital library including copyright, the pros and cons of direct uploading of documents by Partnership Forum members, sector views, and the need for a latest updates feature. Also discussed were aspects of the research request form for Missions to use to request research from RPCD staff. A target date of April 11th was set for Dr. Hassanein's review of the beta of this page. In addition, the role of Google technical support was discussed, as well as the means for security for the website.

Dr. Blumel and Ms. Erb met with a member of AED's design team to engage support for colors and fonts and overall design of the site, which would be consonant with a document template. Since the Program cannot have its own logo, every effort will be made to have consistent fonts and colors.

The team also initiated contact with Google partners to determine if the Program qualifies for in-depth engineering support based on the existing relationship between AED and Google on the USAID-supported Rwanda Education Commons (implemented by the ITAC team). Google adopts projects each quarter to assist, and these discussion were ongoing at the end March.

Kick-Off Meeting Plans

Ms. Hanna and Ms. Choucri continued work to get bids from local venues for a kick off meeting, both prior to the revolution and after the revolution. Given the uncertainty in Egypt the team also discussed the possibilities of holding the kick off meeting in an alternative country, such as Jordan. However, discussion with Ms. Delaney and Dr. Hassanein indicated that it would be very difficult for Mission staff to travel to join a kick-off meeting, given uncertainty surrounding events in several countries. The request was made to think of alternative ways to engage in kick off activities, without the need to meet.

One suggested alternative accepted by Ms. Delaney and Dr. Hassanein was to contact Missions to get their input on research priorities. This effort was part of the kick-off meeting originally, but can also be accomplished through teleconferences with Mission staff. Further planning for this will be pursued in April and May.

Informational Meetings with Potential Partners

During this period, Dr. Blumel met with personnel from two organizations that work in the region. The purpose of the meetings was to answer questions about the Program.

The first meeting resulted from an email inquiry from Ms. Susan Stroud, Executive Director of Innovations in Civic Participation, to Dr. Hassanein, inquiring about the RPCD Program. The inquiry resulted in a meeting in March with Ms. Stroud, to give her the background and information about the Program.

The second meeting was with a brief discussion with Dr. Ibrahim Sharqieh, Deputy Director of the Brookings Doha Center while he was in Washington. The meeting was very brief and informative about the work of the Center.

These contacts may be helpful resources for the Program in the future, both in terms of potential research and locating expertise, as well as potential Partnership Forum members. These meetings will make it easier to pursue further contacts for these purposes.

April to June Projected Activities

The next round of activities from April to June will depend in part on the status of suspension and any further guidance from the AO and USAID regarding activities that can be pursued.

In April at the request of the OMEP office, the Program presented a 5 Point plan for further activities. These included

- Moving ahead to meet in person with potential Partnership Forum members;
- Continuing to work on the Portal, specifically on the research request page as a priority;
- Moving on to contact missions regarding their research priorities and needs;
- Using short-term technical support from the AED home office to answer research questions from Missions, once the research request page is functional.

An additional activity for which home office short-term technical assistance can be used is in the development of a grants manual for the grant based research. In addition, other Portal development will continue including identifying content for the digital library, and content for the site pages.

The ability to continue with these activities will be dependent in part on the ability to travel by Washington-based staff to countries in the region as well as to Cairo. If permission is given to hire and open an office in Egypt before the transfer of assets to a new organization, then a new review of activities will be needed more quickly. A new workplan should be prepared in June for the final quarter of the year, with additional planning for Years Two and Three of the Agreement.

It is also important to note that unrest continues in the region. Of the Program countries, Yemen has experienced a period of protracted protest which may lead to regime change. It is anticipated that events may present ongoing challenges that will demand continued creativity and flexibility in program responses.

