

USAID FY04 Mid-term Report

Program Title

Leadership Training for Environmental Cooperation in the Middle East

Respectfully submitted by:

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Section I – Review of activities

A) Environmental Studies Program

Thirty-six young environmentalists attended the spring semester 2005 at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies (AIES), of which 24 were Middle Eastern participants who received USAID scholarship funding. The program was conducted in English as a common language for all. The duration of the semester was 4 months and the diverse background of Jordanian, Palestinian, Israeli and Jewish participants provided a strong foundation for the start of their environmental leadership training.

The challenging curriculum was designed to engage participants in current debates and stimulate awareness of the themes and perspectives surrounding national, regional and global environmental cooperation. The following selection of courses were offered: ‘Applied Sustainability’, ‘Behavioral Ecology’, ‘Human Aspects of Environmental Studies’, ‘Human Ecology’, ‘Organic Gardening’, ‘Comparative Environmental Law’, ‘Culture, Adaptation & the Environment’, ‘Moses - A Study of Leadership and Environmental Wisdom’ and ‘Environmental Economics’.

The Interdisciplinary Seminar course, in which participants analyze regional environmental issues, was mandatory. This core component of the program encouraged participants to view environmental problems from social, cultural and scientific perspectives. The course, entitled, ‘Water in the Middle East’, explored critical issues of water sources and their management in the Middle East, and investigated the political, economic and social perspectives of this natural resource.

A second compulsory component of the semester was the Independent Study Project (ISP). Each participant chose a special area of focus in which to conduct research under the supervision of an Arava Institute mentor. This course helped participants to develop practical skills necessary for the future environmental projects they will implement after completing the program. Participants shared their findings in a fifteen-minute presentation at the end of the semester. Two of the ISPs included teams comprised of an Israeli, an American and an Arab participant and several other topics were investigated by Arab-Jewish partnerships. Some examples of the semester’s independent study included topics ranging from Environmental Education in Israel to the Effects of Compost on organic crops, from Shopping Behavior in Aqaba to Tourism in the Southern Sinai, and from Stream Restoration issues in the Middle East to Community Gardening in the Bedouin Town of Arara.

Two intensive field trips in Israel brought the program participants directly in touch with relevant environmental issues affecting Arabs and Jews, and exposed them to perspectives from educators, activists, community leaders, decision-makers, and other professionals about aspects of the social and political context in which environmental problems develop. Themes included: Why is it crucial for environmentalists to address issues around peace and conflict? How do we identify the areas that environmental leaders can contribute to peace?

The semester was complemented by the conflict resolution course, ‘Peace-Building & Environmental Leadership Seminar’ (PELS). This course provided a safe and facilitated forum for participants to search for tools and skills to help build a lasting peace in the Middle East. They examined different perspectives on cultural and political issues and they

were exposed to the variety of challenges facing communities in this region including Jewish, Palestinian, Bedouin, Druze, and Bahai. Participants learned about theoretical and practical approaches that are necessary to ensure peaceful inter-communal coexistence at local, national and global levels. PELS helped participants to respond so that tensions could bring forth new strengths and solidarity, improve leadership capabilities and encourage more effective and creative contact between different communities.

Dialogue sessions each semester served to open lines of communication and turn conflict into an opportunity for group development. PELS included ongoing professional facilitation from a Jewish-Arab team from Neve Shalom/ Wahat-al saalam over the course of several meetings. While many participants found this specific component “challenging and frustrating,” they acknowledged that it also provided an important outlet for participants to bring up difficult issues. One Jordanian participant shared, “Honestly, I was afraid in the beginning of this semester about if I can talk as I want and express my feelings without any problem, but after many sessions I noticed that I can talk. This session gave me the brave (*sic*) to be more honest with the people, and also now I feel I can discuss many issues about the conflict with my family, friends, and anyone because I know almost what is the Jews’ point of view.”

In addition to this dialogue process, participants met with other Jewish, Muslim, and Christian peace educators to examine emerging models and initiatives in the prevention and resolution of violence and conflict. The participants took a critical look at some of the protagonists in this field and heard about their commitment and challenges, including a peace meditation workshop about environmental cooperation with Sonia and Robyn Twite, from the ‘Israel Palestine Center for Research and Information’, and a seminar entitled, ‘Conflict Resolution/ Intercultural Communication’ with Suzanne Belleci and Lasse Schmidt from the School for International Training, USA, also currently teaching “Peace and Conflict Studies” at the Arab American University of Jenin.

Another central theme related to compassionate listening and dual narratives, particularly when reflecting on recent historical events in the Israeli-Arab conflict. This theme was expanded on in different ways. Bethlehem University Professor Sami Adwan, co-director of PRIME, spoke on the Role of Education in Peace-Building, and then led a workshop entitled “Milestones in Conflict: Histories on the Same Page.” In addition, participants worked together to address tensions and complexities that typically surface among participants around Holocaust Remembrance Day and Naqba. For the first time since the 2000 Intifada began, nearly all of the Arab participants chose to attend events held on the kibbutz marking Israeli Independence Day. An Israeli-Arab participant remarked that she had never actually taken part in the holiday before, but after this program she wanted to “hear the stories and watch how a community that I care about celebrates their narrative.”

A final topic in conflict analysis discussed during the spring semester 2005, was the influence of Media, in particular focusing on coverage of the Disengagement Plan. Participants were invited to visit Jerusalem to talk with Likud Member of Knesset, Omri Sharon; the Foreign Press Coordinators from the Israeli Prime Minister’s Office; Palestinian National Authority Minister & Senior Palestinian Negotiator, Saeb Erekat; and Israeli journalist and Middle East Commentator, Ehud Yaari. These meetings took place in the International YMCA and American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem, which have historically served important roles in efforts toward peace and local reconciliation in the region.

B) Alumni Network (APEN)

In 2005, an alumni network was set up by the Arava Institute and named as the Arava Peace & Environmental Network (APEN). The existence of APEN makes it easier for alumni who know each other to exchange ideas and set up new initiatives and also makes it feasible for alumni from different years/semesters to meet each other.

To date, the project has one full-time staff member who has coordinated the activities and administration of the network. This includes maintaining an updated database, moderating the email alumni listserve, posting funding, internship and job opportunities for alumni on the website, assisting in networking among environmental activists in the Middle East, and generally coordinating ongoing contact with and between alumni. The initial stages of the APEN project required a great deal of time dedicated to locating correct information for our alumni activities in order to develop a database of project information so that alumni can learn about each other's work. The development of this database is still in progress.

APEN has a Steering Committee made up of a group of 10 Arab and Jewish alumni who are active leaders within the region. The members held their first meeting in June 2005 in Jerusalem. Together with the APEN Coordinator, the Steering Committee chooses new alumni projects which will make the most impact on the Arab and Jewish communities of our region by addressing environmental issues in Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. These alumni projects have comprised a major part of the work of APEN, which assists alumni in finding partners and funding in order to start the projects. The APEN Coordinator has frequently held meetings with small groups of alumni in Israel and Jordan to review their ideas for projects and discuss the possibilities for APEN involvement. A list of current APEN projects is included in the next section.

Section II – Progress on performance

The Environmental Studies Program

The main objective of the Environmental Studies Program at the Arava Institute is to create a new generation of Jewish and Arab leaders who will work together to solve the region's environmental challenges. The success of the program's spring semester in 2005 has been evaluated through interviews with the participants to assess the impact of the program. At the beginning and end of the semester, participants were asked to express their opinions on the value of studying at the AIES, their expectations of studying at the AIES, their understanding of the severity of the region's environmental issues, and the importance of peace & security in the region and its relevance to the environment. The following points highlight the main conclusions from the evaluation:

- The majority of participants were attracted to the AIES because they felt strongly about wanting to enhance their knowledge of the relationship between the environment and peace/social justice in the Middle East.
- Many of the participants recognized the well-known environmental challenges for the region at the beginning of the semester, such as water, but by the end of the period they also understood the social and economic dimensions of a range of environmental challenges. As one Jordanian male participant said at the end of the semester, *"From my point of view I now think the lack of cooperation*

and coordination between the countries in the Middle East is the most significant problem that confronts the Environment in this part of the world”.

- Although participants could identify regional environmental issues at the beginning of the semester, almost 80% were limited in their knowledge of what caused the problems, and what potential solutions were available. By the end of the semester, participants were able to suggest a variety of approaches that respond to many environmental issues.
- At the end of the semester, Moslem and Christian Arabs were united in their opinion that their environmental leadership training had led to them becoming informed and effective environmental activists. 75% of Israeli participants believed that they had increased their environmental knowledge and leadership skills.
- There was a consensus among participants that there are reasons to be optimistic about making peace and they had all learned of ways to advance that process in both their personal and professional lives. *“..if there are disagreements or major issues, we can find areas to agree upon. We don’t have to agree on everything in order to reach understanding” (Palestinian male participant).*
- Upon completion of the semester, participants were clear in their belief that the mixture of cultures, nationalities and religions was instrumental to their experience at the AIES. *“Living together in a diverse community – it was more challenging than I expected. I learned plenty about myself from this and I think a lot of other people did. It is an incredible thing to experience and important.” (Israeli female participant).*

Problems arising in the first part of the year were dealt with by the AIES staff and Executive Committee. Since the staff and faculty of the Environmental Studies Program are very experienced in the operation of the semester, problems that came up were small-scale. Many of the tensions that arose among the participant body were welcomed as a starting point to understanding cross-cultural differences and examining tolerance. Therefore, problems of this nature were discussed as part of the PELS sessions, simultaneously demonstrating the power of dialogue and helping to build trust between Arab and Jewish participants.

The Arava Peace & Environmental Network (APEN)

In the period since its creation, APEN has been able to bring together alumni from different years/semesters and from different backgrounds. This growing network has so far provided an exciting forum for new initiatives that build on peace and protect the environment through Jewish-Arab cooperation. These projects draw on the leadership skills and academic knowledge gained by participants during their participation in the Environmental Studies Program. To this end, supporting new alumni projects has been one of the most significant achievements of APEN so far this year and has brought attention to the impact the Arava Institute is having on societal and political structures in the Middle East. Over the past six months, APEN has helped launch several projects designed by Arava Institute alumni, including:

- Negev Bedouin Education – set up by Ilana Meallem (Jewish) and run in cooperation with the Arab-Jewish Center for Equality, Empowerment and Cooperation (AJEEC). Alumni Alaeddin Hadeah (Arab) and Elan Gerzon (Israeli) have worked together on the project to implement environmental awareness programs for Bedouin children.

- Galil Organic Farming – a project of Arrasid, an organization set up by Laithe Gnaim (Israeli Arab), which supports a holistic approach to the sustainable development of the Arab sector in Israel. The project emphasizes values of social and environmental justice to Arab farmers through the promotion of organic farming methods and regeneration techniques.
- Akko Rainwater Harvesting – Set up by Anis Feran (Arab), who will work with alumni Hadeel Mageed (Arab) and Alon Rothchild (Jewish), this project develops a community-oriented and owned water conservation program. It is in the process of being established in a mixed Arab-Jewish neighborhood of Akko using low-tech water catchment and purification techniques.
- West Bank/ Gaza Stream Restoration – Arava Institute alumni, Dima Halawani (Palestinian), Mousa Diabat (Palestinian), Neta Nagouker (Israeli), Roey Angel (Israeli) and Hila Ackerman (Israeli), have been working together on this project to reduce pollution levels in waters in Palestinian areas.
- Biogas Development in Arab Communities – Initial stages of implementing biogas development. Steering Committee and Think Tank meetings have convened and with the assistance of Arava Institute alumni, Mazen Moabi (Arab), a Bedouin NGO will be formed to control and direct community development of the technology concurrent with pilot program operations.
- Arab Youth Movement Environmental Education – Nava Oliver (Israeli) and Mazen Moabi (Arab) are in the process of developing a curriculum that is designed to increase awareness of environmental issues among Arab youth leaders and provide them with practical skills to encourage environmental conservation in Arab towns and cities.
- Aqaba – Eilat Environmental Education – A joint project between southern regions in Jordan and Israel, set up by Keren Sapir (Israeli) and Nili Elyashiv (Israeli).
- Amman Environmental Cooperation - In conjunction with Seeds of Peace, alumni Radi Al-Sairifi (Jordanian), Dawlah Abu-Dweih (Palestinian) and Tova Scherr (Jewish) are working together to create and implement a project to teach environmental values to graduates of the Seeds of Peace camps.

To date, some challenges faced by APEN have been concerned with the logistics of initiating a new project, such as finding office space, setting up an alumni database and organizing the AIES web site for alumni postings. Although such issues are expected when creating a new project, these problems have been quite time-consuming and demanding. Nonetheless, APEN staff has worked hard to make sure the foundations of the project are set up correctly as this will allow for the smooth running of the project as it works towards its main goals over the coming months.

Section III – External or internal issues that have affected implementation

Before the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000, the Arava Institute was able to bring participants on environmental trips to Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. Such trips provided visual stimuli of the problems participants learn about as part of their studies. The Arava Institute would like to be able to once again incorporate these aspects of environmental cooperation into the Environmental Studies Program, but to date, this has proven too difficult for security reasons.