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Remarks by Montasser Kamal, M.D., Ph.D.

Chief of the United Nations Health Institutions Unit

Director General of Multilateral Programs, Canadian International Development Agency (Quebec)

My relationship with the Near East Foundation began more than 20 years ago, starting from their work in Egypt. During that time I was a medical student at Cairo University, and at a later date, I worked directly with their Center for Development Services as a manager. NEF has without doubt come to be one of the most influential institutions in my life and the lives of many other development practitioners in Egypt and other countries of the Middle East.

“The influence of NEF cannot be attributed to the scale of its financial resources, which was always modest, but is mainly due to the ability of its leadership to engage in key development issues, making timely decisions and charting new strategic directions and alliances. These decisions have contributed substantially to helping alleviate the suffering of poor women, men and children in the region....

“Perhaps one of the most extraordinary achievements of NEF has been to bring the voice of the poor to policymakers. In the absence of democratic processes, people’s voices are often lost to the more powerful. That is not the case where NEF works. Where NEF works, people now know that power is not a zero-sum game and that they have an ally who can help them bridge this power gap in an effective and constructive way.

“I remember the time I was working at NEF, when the concept of citizen participation in development was paid lip-service at best. At that time, NEF had embarked on a change strategy by which all its projects and programs had to demonstrate that they were participatory in nature. It was not easy. It is still not easy. But progress has been made, and NEF has come to set the ground rules on how to encourage participation and create the social sphere for it to take place.

“NEF has also had a profound impact on my life. Work ethos, teamwork, mutual respect and having an investigative mind—are all qualities which I gained while at NEF and which I carry with me to this day.”

Shortly after the Camp David accords were signed in 1978, development resources began pouring into Egypt, but something vital was in short supply—qualified local staff—to use these new funds effectively. The Near East Foundation saw this need for a pool of skilled development professionals who could provide necessary project management, development and capacity-building services. Given this important recognition, NEF headed in a new direction in the Middle East with a vital and continuing infusion of financial

support and technical assistance.

At first CDS carried on the previous professional development activities, but then realized yet another need existed—capacity building for institutions.

While continuing its own grant-making and programs throughout the 1980s, NEF began to emphasize the professional development of individuals, including forming strategic partnerships with other organizations in order to provide Egyptian nationals with training and education and a chance to apply what they had learned. It was called “the network,” more formally known as the Development Practice Support Network.

NEF provided sustained funding for needed publications, local learning as well as scholarships to study abroad.

While the focus was on Egypt, the network soon expanded into Sudan and Jordan as well. It attracted young professionals employed by local and international nongovernmental organizations; and also tried to lure well-educated, young people into the development field, particularly encouraging them to work outside capital cities and go into the countryside. An amazing 5,000-plus development practitioners joined this network, and many went on to key posts, both locally and internationally.

By 1990 a new organization clearly was badly needed to accommodate them. Heroically, 15 network veterans left secure jobs and an uncertain future to establish the NEF Cairo affiliate—Center for Development Services (CDS).



At first CDS carried on the previous professional development activities, but then realized yet another need existed—capacity building for institutions. For the next several years the NEF affiliate focused on improving management, finances, and service delivery by collaborating organizations. A wide range of Arabic-language courses and materials, training, and technical assistance was developed by CDS and provided to them.

Also, CDS approached leading lights in the field in order to provide Arab-language materials that made a significant contribution, in particular on participatory approaches; that in turn influenced development education and practice throughout the region, raising standards to new heights. Thousands of nongovernmental organizations were strengthened and became valued partners to their communities, donors and governments. That CDS was based in Cairo was instrumental in its accomplishing so much in such a short time, given many donors were attracted to undertake development in a country of 70 million people, more than any other in the region.

More recently CDS has again repositioned itself, this time addressing the roles of government and the private sector.

CDS started offering project management services by the mid-1990s, with its evaluations particularly in demand. By 1998 this NEF Cairo affiliate had 60 full-time employees and had become the largest single provider of Arab-language development services for nongovernmental organizations in the Middle East. More recently CDS has again repositioned itself, this time addressing the roles of government

and the private sector. For peak impact and continuing sustainability, CDS now is intensely involved in participatory planning, coalition building, and the creation of structures and networks.

Here are some cases in community and sector development NEF-Egypt addressed in 2004-05.

PHILANTHROPY

At a meeting hosted by CDS, 40 lead researchers and experts from six countries came together in Cairo to address the subject of philanthropy for social investment and development, with funding provided by the Ford Foundation. CDS's Egyptian philanthropy program is examining the patterns and size of local philanthropy and very importantly, its potential to play a larger role in national development. This pragmatic, action-oriented research is considered a leading effort to understand local assets of all kinds and mobilize them for community betterment. In addition to Egypt, conference participants were from Indonesia, Turkey, Britain, India and Tanzania.

AGRICULTURE

In what could become the largest project ever implemented by NEF in this field in Egypt, CDS began the first phase of agricultural development of reclaimed desert land west of Lake Nasser, the largest fresh water reservoir in the world and a fragile environment under increasing stress. Funding came from Canada's International Development Research Center, supplemented by a grant for training and market research from the UN International Fund for Agricultural Development. The project also represents a landmark for NEF's growing expertise in innovative and sustainable strategies for communities with delicate ecosystems and changing socio-ecological environments. The aim is to enhance the health, income, and welfare of the 2,500 small landholding families of the area. That includes an eco-health approach by CDS's agro-ecology project which designed a plan to overcome such difficulties as poisonous bites from snakes and scorpions, the remoteness of the area, and lack of medical and emergency health facilities.

STREET CHILDREN

Ongoing since early 2003, CDS's collaboration with the Cairo-based Arab Council for Childhood and Development aims to unify the efforts of five countries in the Arab world and build their institutional capacity to address the phenomenon of street children and their lost human potential. Participating in this significant joint initiative are Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, Syria, and Yemen. The project has three main phases and CDS is involved in all of them: first, development of a general framework for action, including planning, budgeting and reporting; second, training workshops for the five countries using that framework; and three, creation of operational manuals and application of the information and skills they contain. The Council and CDS previously worked together on a training program on project design and proposal writing for 24 participants from 13 Arab countries. This project builds upon Near East Foundation's involvement with street children in Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, and most-recently in Armenia.



INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

But one example of the wide expertise CDS makes available to community-based organizations addressing a range of needs and issues is a three-month project with the Association for Young Diabetics. The organization was founded in Egypt in 2000 and since has served over one thousand cases, helping young diabetics and their families better manage this disease. After conducting a comprehensive organizational assessment of management, finances and programs, CDS worked with board and key staff to devise expansion and implementation plans, then collaborated on securing needed funding to service the increasing number of young diabetics across Egypt. NEF's health and population staff began to take note of diabetes as a rising health concern in the late 1990s, not only in Egypt, but throughout the region.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

A first for Egypt, a fixed-price people's market for the Al Mounib District of Giza came about with assistance from CDS and the United Nations Development Program as well as cooperation from the Giza Governorate, the Social Fund for Development, and Sekem companies. Only Venezuela has a similar enterprise, and it was to the popular market there that the field team went for a first hand look at a market that operates by group collaboration, and directly connects agricultural operators with the consumers of their produce. Then CDS started training 30 local volunteers and potential market operators, designed the research and field work, and supervised the team. NEF has a strong background in establishing urban markets, including the upgrading of the Tablita Market in Old Cairo and the establishment of the El-Harameen Market in East Alexandria.



CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

A year-long, multi-faceted involvement in upgrading services to Egyptian children with disabilities and special needs and at-risk youth in both urban and rural areas included a number of different assignments for CDS. A main objective of the World Bank-funded project was to design a comprehensive training program for staff of the Egyptian Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs, who work with at-risk young people in Greater Cairo. In addition, CDS monitored and evaluated 33 subprojects by service providers in 11 governorates throughout the country, leading to a complete and streamlined database. Based on this in-depth familiarity, CDS was asked to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the entire initiative preparatory to World Bank review. Results indicated nearly 45,000 people benefited—children, trainees, participating organizations. The increase in the number of service providers was perhaps the most important contribution as well as the development and testing of new, integrated ways of providing services. CDS's experience with these issues goes back to 1995, including authoring a series of manuals on street children for the Arab Council for Childhood and Development, and long-term assistance to organizations like the Hope Village Association, which works with street children, and the Hospital Day Association, which serves the disabled.

HEALTH

In a public-private partnership affecting the delivery of health care nationally, CDS is partnering with the Arab African International Bank and Cairo University Specialized Pediatrics Hospital, investing in the hospital's staff and expansion plans. The hospital serves an average of 2,500 patients weekly and is one of the largest health care providers for Egyptian children. For its part, the bank is providing the majority of financing for the project; while CDS is upgrading nursing skills and simultaneously creating a core of well-qualified professionals capable of transferring their knowledge. The plan is for CDS to exit in a year with a sustainable program in place. Further, CDS is working at the operational level with the hospital's administration to improve management, technical capacities and day-to-day efficiency. CDS was selected to play this pivotal role because of its involvement in the Egyptian health sector since 1991, most particularly because of its truly remarkable success at enhancing nursing as a career in Aswan. That project has since expanded to the Governorates of Aswan and Qena.



POPULATION

Working with the Egyptian government's Social Fund for Development, in turn using World Bank funding for 54 projects, CDS documented the implementation of four models being tried to increase awareness about population and reproductive health issues. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, including conducting 373 interviews, CDS clearly defined the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of each model, determining exactly what created success and effectiveness. From these lessons learned, CDS then extracted the basics for an efficient and sustainable model to address population growth and improve the lives of rural women of reproductive age, reporting these complex findings to the government. CDS also examined each model for the approach most helpful to effective cooperation among the Ministry of Health and Population, nongovernmental organizations and local communities—the capacity-building part of the project.

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