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WEST BANK

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The West Bank village Al-Bathan has big problems, according to Mayor Mohammed Salahat, who heads the village council, only two years old and limited in resources. About 3,000 people live in Al-Bathan's scattering of houses and small landholdings, averaging two-to-three dunums. Unemployment is a staggering 60 percent, since so many residents have lost jobs in Israel. But the youngish, serious-eyed mayor peering through his glasses, has a vision for his community of something better.

On the up side, the large map in his office shows the locations of seven natural springs in the village, producing 5.5 million cubic meters of water a year, and a system of canals—making the Al-Bathan area green all year round and full of tourism potential. There are now seven small initiatives underway, he said, including restaurant development, swimming pools, cafes and private water parks for this region abundant with ancient history, vibrant culture, scenic landscapes and other attractions. A traditional Palestinian picnic spot, 500,000 visitors came each year before the *Intifada*, but despite such success, tourism wasn't well planned, he added, and lacked appropriate infrastructure even before the economy suffered its current drastic decline.

Now the mayor is lobbying the Palestinian National Authority and nongovernmental organizations for help with proper planning. He attended a recent tourism forum held in Nablus on just where new facilities should be located, and has established a good working relationship with Al Najah National University in Nablus and its resources. The mayor is encouraged and now is looking beyond local tourism to Al-Bathan's national potential. Since Palestinians no longer have ready access to the Mediterranean, he says, Al-Bathan and its beautiful natural environs become a major recreational resource ripe for development.

In 1998 a local pediatrician and a village mayor together contacted the Near East Foundation office in the West Bank. Dr. Hashem El Sholi and then-Mayor Assad Sawalmah from the village of Asira Al-Shamaliya north of Nablus were concerned about the increasing incidence of waterborne disease among children in the area. To prevent further outbreaks, help was needed. From these initial meetings began a long, productive partnership between NEF and an ever growing number of supporters—the Asira Municipality, local councils from 13 villages in the surrounding area, and more than 30,000 area residents.



That relationship continues today and remains the strong core of NEF's 2004-05 programs in the West Bank serving a "cluster" of villages: Asira Al-Shamaliya, Sabastiya, Bayt Imrin, Nisif Jubail, Burqa, Bazzariya, Al-Naqura, Dayr Sharaf, Yasid, Ajansiniya, Bathan, Taluzza, Bayt Iba, and Zawata.

Initially, cooperation focused on the development of a common vision for the entire cluster area, addressing basic needs while seeking longer-term solutions to endemic economic and social problems. Schools were overcrowded and health services inadequate; water and sanitation in need of repair and expansion; garbage collection sporadic with few available dumping sites. In particular, illegal roadside dumping and the burning of toxic wastes were affecting health conditions throughout the area. Also, family incomes were low and opportunities for jobs scarce in a society characterized by a young and growing population.

For NEF and its partners these were immediate priorities, yet to address them meant more long-term approaches: human development, institutional capacity building, and more business-like planning and service delivery. This in turn required effective leadership, good governance, and informed citizen participation. In short, to assure sustainability of any improvements made, there was a need for a delicate balancing act between long-term development needs and short-term priorities.

THE SECOND INTIFADA

As is often the case, reality overtook planning. Economic and social conditions quickly deteriorated given mounting political pressures of the second *Intifada*, and NEF's focus shifted from the long-term to simply "what's possible with what we've got."

Local economies downslided. Laborers once accustomed to good salaries, no longer were allowed to cross into Israel, and agriculture no longer an option for the majority of these young men. Education was interrupted. Freedom of movement was restricted and often dangerous, affecting the ability of employees to reach their work in the West Bank; also preventing producers from obtaining raw materials and from transporting goods to local markets. Local councils, struggling to cope with declining economic conditions, were strapped for cash, and despite often valiant efforts, generally unable to cope with emerging conditions. International assistance downturned as the political situation deteriorated further, and donor assistance increasingly focused on emergencies and relief operations.



Despite all, the Near East Foundation continued to build its relationship with local municipalities in the "cluster," bringing relief while establishing a base for future, long-term projects. We did all we could—and frankly accomplished a good deal. The Near East Foundation Consortium of NEF and its contributors, international partners and project sponsors, provided assistance to families in need, supported and encouraged school attendance, sponsored summer camps, and encouraged community participation in environmental education and clean-up campaigns. The consortium helped pay mounting utility costs for local families and small

businesses; supported several self-help initiatives for women and youth; planned and raised funds for local infrastructure and water projects; and shared in community celebration of special events. All this was done in collaboration with local councils and civil society organizations, with many others throughout Palestine joining the efforts.

As a result and even during the height of the *Intifada*, more than 1,000 children and their families were involved in special programs for "Helping Kids Cope" under conditions of continuing stress and violence. Over 2,500 children benefited from NEF provision of teaching materials and school supplies for children, along with very important nutritional supplements through our "Cup of Milk" project. Building upon last year's success and responding to the requests of the six participating communities, this year packages of dairy products went to the entire family, not just to kindergarten children—particularly helpful to the poorest. All 17 kindergartens received the milk, white and yellow cheese, and other local dairy products such as pasteurized lebaneh.

ZERO ABSENTEEISM

Indicative of local enthusiasm for "Cup of Milk," there was absolutely no absenteeism on distribution dates. Family contributions to the program—about \$9, 25 percent of total costs—were easily collected in their entirety in the first month. Building upon evident parental support, this year NEF launched a health and nutrition awareness program for the mothers of participating children, attracting 440 women to the workshops. Also the local dairy industry benefited. The Al-Safa Dairy Plant in Nablus, for example, had an important new outlet for its products during a difficult economic period of generally low sales, assuring

continued employment for its workers and the 250 small farmers in turn dependant upon the factory for their livelihoods. Tetra Pac Inc. also is assisting the NEF program, funded by Human Concern International.

New classrooms were built onto existing schools and in some villages, playgrounds and toilet facilities added. In Asira Al-Shamaliya an amphitheater was constructed with an added play area and cafeteria, now venues for local celebrations and community events. A new folkloric troupe nurtured along by NEF, now performs in the amphitheater and at weddings and other celebrations, building up pride and identity. "Emphasis on traditional culture, folklore, and language is essential for holding societies together in difficult times such as Palestinians now face," commented NEF Regional Director Roger Hardister.

With NEF project development and proposal writing assistance, the poorest of the poor in the village of Yasid got clean, potable drinking water this year, and workers in the area gainful employment while making that possible. Funded by a grant from the Welfare Association, the largest Palestinian non-governmental organization, 20 water cisterns were dug. NEF worked closely with the local village council to develop transparent and accountable selection criteria. In addition, local workers benefited from the 900 working days needed to build the cisterns and an average income gain of \$13,500.

Also, NEF partnered with the national Palestinian association working with youth, Taawon Cooperation for Conflict Resolution, on boosting the infrastructure and programming of three youth organizations in Nablus, hopefully the pilot for an even bigger youth program now in the planning stage, also financed by the Welfare Association through World Bank Assistance.

The 10-month, nearly \$100,000 project included the renovation of three youth centers, three sport halls, three Internet cafes and libraries, and four management programs and workshops, benefiting around 600 young people. "The emphasis is on financial sustainability over the long term," said NEF-West Bank Country Director Tarek Z. Abdel Ghany Kotob, "designing recreational and sports activities on a fee-for-service or cost recovery system."

THE BIGGER PICTURE

With such assistance, large and small and throughout the "cluster," NEF has been instrumental in creating new institutions and strengthening others. These developments, while clearly positive in themselves, all have a much bigger role to play as conditions in the area become more stable and long-term plans come on line.

In summary and no small feat, NEF's environmental program is providing jobs, improving sanitation, increasing health, encouraging voluntarism, developing local leadership, and instilling project management skills. Indeed, many consider it a model for future solid waste disposal for the entire West Bank."



A case in point and in consonance with the larger vision with which NEF and the residents of the cluster area began their collaboration years ago--the preparation of a landfill site is well underway, benefiting more than 3,500 households. The large, up-to-code site, complete with electricity and water needed for cleaning and composing, has been built by the municipality of Asira. Also, five village councils have signed on, sharing costs and benefits, and determining the fines to be paid for violations of their new system. Roadside dumps are to be cleared in cooperation with local councils and illegal dumping ordinances are now being enforced.

Further, NEF's Environmental Action Program (EAP) has established a system of garbage collection and sorting at the household level; providing for timely transfer of sorted garbage to the project dumpsite; identifying viable markets for recycled products; and separating and sorting refuse to meet the demands of recycling. In summary and no small feat, NEF's environmental program is providing jobs, improving sanitation, increasing health, encouraging voluntarism, developing local leadership, and instilling project management skills. Indeed, many consider it a model for future solid

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HERE'S PRECISELY HOW

Some Environmental Action Program facts straight from the grassroots include the following this year. Comprehensive, 50-hour, training courses held for 80 male and female volunteers, focusing on solid waste management, sorting, collecting and composting, as well as community leadership and collaboration, communications and reporting. Equipped with this information, they became the core of a much larger volunteer effort to build community awareness, in all kinds of ways, including house-to-house visits along the town's streets, advocating the sorting of organic and inorganic waste, just one for-instance. NEF field staff closely monitored the progress and development of these volunteer groups to sustain their environmental services and are at work forming new youth groups. Targeting the sweepers in particular, collection employees in the five villages were trained about solid waste's deleterious impact on the environment and in new sorting, collecting, and disposal techniques at three workshops and four additional meetings.



Among many other events designed to focus attention on the environment, the Asira community planned, launched, and directed clean-up campaigns, some attracting more than 240 participants—people of all ages, involved and volunteering. They collected waste, cleaned streets and illegal dumping sites, painted, distributed new waste bins, and generally worked together to make their environment a better place to live—plus promoted their cause with the placement of 2,000 posters and 1,000 stickers.

Providing education without necessary resources only creates frustration. So NEF arranged for such elementary equipment as brooms and shovels for street cleaning, on through arousing community pressure that led to increased frequency of weekly waste collection, accomplished by new tractors and trolleys—thanks to NEF. Also, there are now environmentally-friendly and educational play gardens for children, a creative kids' corners, mothers fitness center, among other small but helpful happenings.

ECONOMICS

Agriculture and animal husbandry are key for an economic revival in many parts of the “cluster” and NEF is working with local authorities on plans to increase the number of livestock and boost dairy product production. Already underway is NEF's rehabilitation of the area's olive industry and encouragement of a wide variety of related income-generating activities.

To assure long-term sustainability, however, there is a need for something larger. NEF and its partners envision a tourist route through the “cluster,” beginning in neighboring Nablus, the so-called “Gateway City,” known for its historical core and traditional markets. From there the route would wind its way through one of the most beautiful natural areas in the West Bank, with a varied landscape of rolling hills, small forests, orchards, and water parks, amidst picturesque villages mixing traditional and modern buildings, open-air restaurants, and historic sites. Such attractions already are a magnet for local tourists and the hope is for many regional and international visitors in the future.

NEF's involvement in the 'cluster' has demonstrated without doubt the strong commitment of local leaders to good governance; and these same local councils are now moving beyond their individual concerns to form a Joint Services Council. This in turn will provide the legal status necessary to move forward with larger cooperative efforts as well as the vehicle to attract international funding.

NEW JOINT SERVICES COUNCIL

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cooperative efforts as well as the vehicle to attract international funding. To support this development, NEF is planning a pilot project promoting good governance, encouraging greater transparency, and providing a platform for broader participation by local residents and civil society institutions in their government.

In short, NEF's involvement with these West Bank villages exemplifies common economic problems and social concerns creating shared solutions. We think our "cluster" approach has clearly demonstrated more options, increased cost effectiveness, and helped assure sustainability. For all that we thank our partners in 2004-05 for their support in making it all possible: United Nations Volunteers (UNV), Human Concern International (HCI), Mercy International (MI), the World Assembly of Moslem Youth (WAMY), Flora Family Foundation, and Mosaic Foundation.

RELIEF STILL NECESSARY



While NEF is an international development organization, we understand the importance of traditional feast days—and their spirit of charity and community. As the 2004 Ramadan began, 250 food packages containing 16 nutritious foods cheered impoverished Palestinian families. Need was determined by the numbers of children and orphans, the sick and elderly, the unemployed and those families unable to maintain a minimum income level. The mid-October distributed was initiated by NEF in cooperation with Mercy International and Human Concern International, and with the participation of local municipal governments and Islamic charity committees in the West Bank villages selected by the number of inhabitants. In addition, the Ramadan food packages inspired yet more generosity, for

example, the municipality of Asira and their village Islamic charity committee provided another 200 food packages for the needy.

A few months later, again joined by its partners, NEF saw to it that nearly a thousand of the poorest "cluster" families received the Eid Al-Adha feast day they deserved. Widows, orphans, unemployed, those with special needs received meat packages along with a "Happy Eid" card and the good wishes of the NEF consortium supporting integrated development in their villages. For Sa'ed Mashaki, a young boy from the village of Yasid, whose unemployed father had not been able to buy meat for many feasts past--this was a real family celebration.

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