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STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



Institute for Community Partnership

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This report was written by Scott Rankin, who conducted the independent evaluation of the AMENCA program and the Neighbourhood Corners Project in 2014. The report was commissioned by ActionAid and produced in collaboration with Asala and ICP with funding from the Australian aid program within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government.



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Front cover: The Separation Wall divides Israel from the occupied Palestinian territory and is both a symbolic and physical barrier affecting the lives of Palestinians. Photo: ActionAid.



Sharing experiences at the Youth vision forum in Jordan, January 2015. Photo: ActionAid.

Introduction

A decade of Australian Government support for NGOs in Palestine through cooperation agreements has generated valuable knowledge about building community resilience. This paper seeks to deepen understanding amongst development actors of different approaches used to build resilience in the occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt); the relative effectiveness of these approaches; and their capacity to sustainably address the many and complex factors impacting upon Palestinian people's resilience.

The first Australia Middle East NGO Cooperation Agreement (AMENCA) program was established in 2005, and the program has been central to Australian Government assistance to oPt through two phases. Fostering resilience emerged as a central pillar of the AMENCA 2 purpose and outcome statements. Program outcomes identified improved livelihoods and empowered households as catalysts for resilience, and strong civil society as an enabler.

AMENCA 2 program performance was measured against two key components:

EFFORTS TO REDUCE VULNERABILITY:

- Increased resilience and well-being through improved livelihoods and empowered households

EFFORTS TO BUILD CAPACITY:

- Strengthened CBOs and NGOs serve their communities to improve self-reliance and resilience; drive social and economic change

Four consortia, each led by an Australian NGO working in partnership with Palestinian civil society organisations, implemented the program. This meant four diverse approaches to achieving the common goal. These differences opened the door for the program to achieve a rich understanding of vulnerability and resilience in the context of the oPt. An independent final evaluation of the AMENCA 2 program noted:

While intrinsically different in their development approaches and philosophies, each of the four Australian lead agencies facilitated consortia that worked tirelessly in a highly complex operating environment. Each consortium facilitated the knowledge and involvement of well-established and highly competent Palestinian NGO partners, while also promoting the role and enhancing the capacity of CBOs as gender inclusive local development actors. Each consortium achieved outcomes and learning through their activities that have been profound in their contribution to building resilience amongst the program's target group of vulnerable Palestinians, while also extending learning, innovation and improved practice throughout the Palestinian development community.

The evaluation identified a significant range of achievements towards resilience, many of which went beyond the successes measured through the program's performance framework. This focused largely on economic resilience, through measurement of incomes and levels of production. Other critical achievements included: the social and economic empowerment of women; the capacity to bounce

back from shocks; greater levels of self-reliance; improved capacity for community based psycho-social support; and **enhanced levels of solidarity, cooperation and mutual support at community level.**

Between 2009 and 2015, ActionAid Palestine (AAP) implemented *Neighbourhood Corners under AMENCA 2* in partnership with leading Palestinian NGOs – Bethlehem University's Institute for Community Partnership (ICP) and Asala.

In the project evaluation, it was noted that: “the project made significant achievements in relation to promoting community resilience, the inclusion of women and youth, strengthening of community fabric and building of social capital that should be shared with other development partners in the oPt.” This paper has been commissioned in response to this recommendation, in order to capture the project's contribution to building community resilience in the oPt.



Tissam, a mother of 6, now owns and manages a sheep farm to support her family and herself. Photo: ActionAid.

Understanding Resilience in the Context of the oPt

The term '*resilience*' has only recently gained traction in development circles. It quickly gathered popularity since it was felt to capture a range of norms and behaviours regarded as preconditions for sustainability.

Resilience and sustainability are intertwined in meaning, since both focus on achieving outcomes that can endure beyond the life of a project intervention. To lay claim to a program having strengthened resilience suggests that strong individual and community capacity and structures are in place to help ensure safe navigation of future shocks. The Australian aid program refers to resilient communities as strong communities, with the capacity and internal strength to cope with and recover from challenges.¹

However, the reality is that different organisations define *resilience* within the context of their own values, operational approaches and global missions. Donor priorities similarly impact upon interpretations. There is therefore no one definition that enjoys a general consensus. There is even greater variation in the strategies that organisations use to achieve resilience and indicators used for measuring its achievement.

There is, however, generally broad agreement regarding why greater levels of resilience are important to the current context of the oPt.

Some of the most commonly mentioned factors include:

- Palestinians live in a uniquely complex context given the many restrictions imposed by the occupation and blockade. This context is prone to sudden and unpredictable change, as demonstrated by frequent, destructive incursions into Gaza by the Israeli military, and randomly applied policies in Area C.
- For many reasons, legal recourse is rarely possible when basic rights are denied. Confidence in and respect for the legal system is very low. This heightens vulnerability and demands a strong capacity for adaptation to shifting circumstances, since the law offers little protection.

1. AusAID, "Australia's aid in fragile and conflict-affected states", <http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/aid-fragile-conflict-affected-states-brochure.pdf> viewed April 2015.

- For various reasons, the Palestinian State is largely unable to fulfill its social contract with the Palestinian people and mitigate vulnerability, placing even greater importance on the resilience of local communities to navigate shocks. Yet a lack of inclusion and democratic process at community level undermines community action and participation, affecting the potential for community level resilience. Decentralisation and an enhanced role for local authorities presents opportunities for greater levels of participation of citizens in community affairs.
- The general lack of control that Palestinians enjoy over their lives undermines business confidence, and has the snowball effect of stifling economic opportunity and worsening unemployment.
- Fragmentation of the Palestinian territory into East Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank, and the division of the West Bank into the distinctly different administrative zones of Areas A, B and C, as well as H1 and H2 in Hebron means that quite different approaches are required for different circumstances, and that lessons learned in one area are not always applicable to other area types.
- Livelihood responses that would be possible in other circumstances commonly need modification or adaptation to accommodate Israeli imposed restrictions on access to land, water, access to markets, freedom of movement and fishing boundaries.
- Historically, there have been limited roles for women and youth in community affairs and decision-making. Promotion of enhanced roles in community affairs for women and youth have been a common strategy in strengthening resilience.

- Palestinians live alongside imminent violence and risk, including frequent demolition of homes for settlements, affecting psychosocial health and undermining resilience.
- In Gaza, people have needed to survive three recent catastrophic wars that have often destroyed hard won gains in human development.
- The overall Palestinian context has instilled an understandable degree of aid-dependence, which runs counter to the concept of self-reliance and resilience.

This situation renders the Palestinian situation unique in global terms. Resilience needs to be considered within a context where people have only limited capacity to manage or steer change given that many factors affecting resilience are in fact controlled by an external, occupying power which is very difficult to hold to account.

Amidst all of the above, it is essential to appreciate and acknowledge the pre-existing levels of resilience demonstrated by Palestinian communities over history, and particularly throughout the past decades. This must be factored into the 'baseline' against which programs should be measured.



"We live in different circumstances, yet we share a dream of unity- We can make it!" Abdallah (a Syrian refugee), Mo'ath and Nasser (volunteers with AAP) and Mohammad (A Jordanian fellow) Photo: ActionAid.

Neighbourhood Corners – Empowering the Marginalised

ActionAid's Country Strategy for the oPt notes that "even if the occupation ended tomorrow, there would still be a need for citizens to be empowered to demand free and fair elections and accountability of government. And the struggle to improve the status of women and other marginalised groups will continue for many years." Responding to this reality sits at the core of the Neighbourhood Corners program and ActionAid's understanding of resilience.

The **Neighbourhood Corners** consortium defined its project objective as:

"contributing to the reduction in vulnerability of Palestinian communities, through building the active agency of women and youth to challenge policies, attitudes and practices that cause or perpetuate rights violations and denials."

This was to be achieved through the empowerment of women and young people, and by supporting development of a vibrant civil society capable of holding authorities, private sector and development actors to account. Neighbourhood Corners' focus on a rights based approach to development was deliberate and multi-faceted. This approach was guided by ActionAid International's theory of change which states that significant change occurs when: a) the very basic conditions of poor and excluded people are met and they have the strength and well-being to claim their rights; b) rights holders are conscious of why their rights have been denied and organise to claim their rights; c) civil society allies are mobilised to act in solidarity with rights holders to claim their rights; and d) policies, laws and practices of the state and non-state

institutions are changed through people-centred advocacy and campaigns.

The Independent Program Review of AMENCA 2 noted that: "the ActionAid consortium worked in a deliberate and sustained manner to open opportunities for women and youth to more actively participate in resolving community issues, resulting in an enhanced capacity for women and youth to assert their right to basic services and improved livelihoods..... including the important achievement of successfully campaigning to assert women's inheritance rights in conservative Hebron, led by Asala."

Collectively, consortium members have worked to build space for the more active participation of women and youth in community affairs, in order to provide a platform from which they can better assert their rights. Deeply considered, longer term strategies have been developed that go beyond the superficial to address the various barriers that deny people voice and prevent their active participation. Registration of women's informal businesses in Chambers of Commerce (CoC) is another campaign under the program that has supported the inclusion and visibility of women entrepreneurs within the private sector and improved their role and participation in policy and decision making. Asala has established Gender Units at CoCs throughout the West Bank, which provide customised services to women entrepreneurs, including counselling, training and market access. These initiatives are now expanding to the rest of Palestine, including Gaza, and have catalysed further efforts to strengthen the election of women onto CoC boards.

Women – moving beyond participation to empowerment

What is needed to ensure that women's participation in program activities moves beyond the tokenistic? What strategies can support women's empowerment, both social and economic, while also enhancing the social capital of the community? These questions are important given that close to half of all AMENCA 2 direct program beneficiaries were women.

Across the oPt, support for women comes in many different forms, with significant variation in the degree of social empowerment that accompanies their opportunity to be economically active. In worst cases, a 'conspiracy of convenience' can emerge between development organisations, women and their husbands to present a façade of 'women's ownership' of project activities. In such cases, women's actual involvement extends little further than being where they are told to be at a designated time, or signing for program resources that will be used by their husband or son, and for which they will have very little control over or capacity to manage. While this might well result in an improved household economy, it does little for a woman's social empowerment.

Based on learning from the ActionAid consortium, a range of different actions contributed to the degree that a woman emerged from a program intervention feeling genuinely empowered and positioned to maintain her enhanced role in household and community affairs. Mobility, voice and capacity development were all key.

In order to set a firm foundation among women and men, Neighbourhood Corners worked in a deep and strategic manner to raise awareness of women's rights under Palestinian law. This approach provided a framework through which women were able to develop the confidence to demand their rights, and the courage to move forward into a more active role within their community. While mere awareness of rights is inadequate in isolation, it forms a vitally important platform for efforts aimed at empowering women.

Raising awareness of rights was approached from multiple angles in a coordinated and complementary effort by consortium members. The establishment of women-only REFLECT groups provided a platform for women to come together and collectively engage on issues. The combination of non-financial services training provided to women borrowers and Asala's inheritance campaign was central to women demanding inheritance rights. ICP supported CBOs to become more aware of issues that constrain women's participation, and strategies relevant to greater levels of inclusion and voice for women in their work and planning. All of these factors worked together in strengthening resilience.

The approach was also built on the understanding that women are more able to assert their rights effectively when they are working in solidarity with other women. While this can occur through a CBO or a cooperative, it can as easily occur through less formal models of cooperation that bring women together to share resources and risks. It is also observed that women working together, sharing information and skills can in some cases build an unstoppable momentum for change, since the group can dispel myths regarding the problems that might arise when women become more mobile and active.

Momentum for Mobility

- In one Hebron community, a woman spoke of how her family had initially refused to let her join with other women in a *Neighbourhood Corners* activity due to cultural concerns, but eventually community pressure and positivity for the activity grew to such a point that the men of her household felt compelled to let her join in.
- In another instance, women spoke of the blossoming of respect for women and their contribution - "*Neighbourhood Corners* has allowed women to 'do' rather than sit back and watch others 'do'."
- Yet another spoke of having previously felt little reason to be interested in community affairs, since she had no capacity to influence them. Now that her opinions are listened to and acted upon, she has become an avid observer of current affairs, and with this additional knowledge and awareness has become more active in community affairs, and more mobile, attending meetings in distant governorates that she would never before dream of having been permitted to attend.

“ Neighbourhood Corners has allowed women to ‘do’ rather than sit back and watch others ‘do’.” ”

An observation is the importance of *supporting women to succeed*. While no activity sets out to fail, too many approaches aimed at strengthening women’s economic position across the oPt have been poorly researched, and are thus highly likely to fail from the outset. This is particularly damaging when trying to promote women’s participation since it runs the risk of achieving exactly the opposite by consolidating negative stereotypes held by men regarding women’s capacity.

Beyond awareness of rights, women need well-considered and appropriately targeted efforts at strengthening capacity in relation to financial management, marketing and technical capacity, if they are to be positioned for economic success. Such training recognises that women’s historic isolation and lack of mobility leaves them poorly positioned to succeed immediately in their economic endeavors. Tailoring such training to the specific needs of individual women is vital.

Asala is a provider of relevant capacity building through their ‘non-financial services’ trainings, which range from business management to gender awareness to training around women’s rights. Over the course of Neighbourhood Corners more than 450 loans were issued to women, including some of which were supplemented with a grant component to support access to loans for poorer women. Of these, 274 loans were for agriculture-related livelihoods including purchase of livestock (poultry, sheep, goats, cows, camels), greenhouses, home gardens and land reclamation.



Amal, 23 years old, shares personal experience of how her engagement in the program helped in building her self-confidence and increased her knowledge. Photo: ActionAid.

Turning a life around

Amtullah² participated in the Neighbourhood Corners project and was interviewed during the project evaluation. Residing in a small village in Hebron, in mid-2013 Amtullah's life was desperate. Having been abandoned by her husband and expelled to an outbuilding of the family compound to make room for his new wife, Amtullah was unable to provide even food for her five children – one of whom had cancer. With barely enough to eat, the children were required to beg and had even taken to stealing, bringing further social pressure and ostracism upon Amtullah. She spoke with tears in her eyes of sleeplessness and severe depression stemming from her situation.

Having heard of Asala from neighbours, Amtullah approached their Hebron office. She had some experience working with dairy cows, and after going through a needs analysis with Asala staff, signed up to take on a \$1,500 loan to buy a dairy cow and other equipment necessary to process products from her cow's milk. A further \$1,000 grant was provided through Neighbourhood Corners in order to reinforce Amtullah's chances of success.

Throughout the interview, Amtullah was able to speak authoritatively about her business management techniques, sourcing required inputs and strategies related to its sustainability. She has used income to purchase a milking machine, which dramatically reduces her workload allowing her to place greater focus on processing of yoghurts and cheeses. This has led to improved quality, increased prices and a growing reputation in her community as a producer of a high quality product.

Amtullah has fallen behind on her monthly repayments, but expressed appreciation to the Asala loan officer for her support through these times, which came not only in the form of a willingness to defer the loan repayment, but support for the development of financial management strategies to effectively manage the situation, including budgeting. While her repayments will soon end, the difficulty she has faced with repayments highlights the importance of the grant component provided by the project in making this business viable.

While the financial relief provided by her new business is clear, one gets the sense when meeting with Amtullah that it is the restoration of control over her life and her family that she most appreciates. Her children are back at school, she is able to provide for her son's treatment, and she is no longer embarrassed to step out into her community. Amtullah is rightfully proud of what she has achieved, and closed with the cheeky gesture of providing sweets for her husband's new wife's children "because I can now afford such gestures."

Intertwined within all of the above is the important enabling role that can be played by men in facilitating women's mobility, participation and voice. While respect and support for women is intuitive to some men, it more commonly needs to be facilitated through structured and strategic management by a respected external party – such as an NGO. Similarly, religious leaders can play an important catalytic role for women, as demonstrated through the inheritance campaign undertaken through Neighbourhood Corners, which won the support of some of Hebron's most senior and respected clerics.

² Amtullah, meaning servant of Allah, is a pseudonym used in order to respect privacy. All other aspects of the story are true.

Supporting CBOs to truly reflect their communities' needs and address vulnerability

An important forum for raising awareness of women's rights and capacities are local community based organisations (CBO). Given constraints faced by the Palestinian government, CBOs have a prominent role to play, including delivery of important community services.

CBOs command power and influence within the community. Some have been dominated by leaders or groups who use the CBO to maintain their position and the status quo, reinforcing class divisions. CBOs are at risk of being captured by elites, so effort is needed to ensure that women's CBOs include poor women, and that agricultural

cooperatives do not only include farmers with capital and high levels of existing capacity. Neighbourhood Corners has shown that it is essential to engage the whole community in order to address reduce vulnerability and support those most in need.

Neighbourhood Corners commenced a structured, logical and sustained plan of action with CBOs to support them to become more inclusive, professional, transparent and accountable in their day to day work. Importantly, the project has worked successfully with CBOs to identify and commence income generating schemes that ensure income streams sufficient to meet CBOs' recurrent costs. Collectively, this has created a dynamic whereby use of target CBO services by community members has increased thirteen fold since project commencement, increased active membership has enhanced membership fees, and levels of trust in CBOs have grown. With this comes the capacity for CBOs to do more, and once they do more, they experience greater levels of community support.

An important initiative undertaken by ICP as part of the project was establishment of Community Planning Committees (CPCs) in three target communities. These CPCs in many respects 'complete the circle', by connecting civil society within communities, including REFLECT groups with local government. This further extends upward accountability, and consolidates progress made in building a voice for women and youth. The CPCs addressed a gap that was observed across the AMENCA program, in opportunities for genuine engagement and participation with local government authorities in planning and direction setting. Without this, the various AMENCA projects missed the opportunity of finding synergies between local government and civil society initiatives.



Saja Al Nashweya and Ameera Al Hreibat, members of youth REFLECT group in Sikka.
Photo: ActionAid.

From little things, big things grow.... sustainable progress in Kharas community

When asked of Neighbourhood Corners' contribution to their CBO, Boards of Directors again and again pointed at filing cabinets and ring binders as evidence of the support provided. While strong administration is clearly important to the effective functioning of a CBO, it seemed to suggest a shallow relationship between project and CBO if filing cabinets and ring binders were the highlight of the relationship. Somewhat impatiently boards were asked "new filing cabinets are great, but do they really have any effect on the quality of your program and your responsiveness to community issues?"

Ismael Hlahleh, Chair of the Kharas Charitable Society (pictured, right below) sat back and began to speak. He highlighted the importance of the financial, health and kindergarten services provided by CBOs, but also the risk posed when a community lacks trust in a CBO. When trust is eroded, membership and participation levels slip, and with that service delivery becomes more difficult. He pointed back over his shoulder at the filing cabinet and files under question. "These, and the financial management training, and most importantly the secure ballot box provided to us all help build trust in our CBO. Trust generates a love for volunteering!" he said with a smile.

Ismael Hlahleh then explained with wonderful logic and structure the impact of the various efforts of the Neighbourhood Corners project to strengthen the administration, capacity and sustainability of the CBO. By being better organised, more transparent and more



Left-to-right, Ibrahim 'Aqabneh, Scott Rankin (independent evaluator), Yousef Al Hroub and Mr. Isma'el Hlahleh- BoD members of Kharas Charitable Society, December 2014. Photo: ActionAid.

inclusive, trust and interest in the CBO had soared. With that came an important spike in membership, but also a surge in member willingness to volunteer and be active in the CBO. Newfound trust in the capacity and direction of the CBO has also given them more credibility to the push for opening space for women and youth to become more active in the organisation. Whereas such a strategy would have been opposed previously, it is now listened to and increasingly supported by families in Kharas.

Confidence in the CBO's financial management and income generating activities had also made it easier to raise funds, allowing the CBO to construct a new floor from which improved health services and a kindergarten are now provided. It is felt as more professionally delivered services are provided, that trust and support for the CBO will continue to increase.

This led to a discussion of sustainability. While the CBO hopes to maintain a relationship with the three Neighbourhood Corners partners, it does not need a relationship with them to survive, since they now have the knowledge, skills and income streams to be sustainable. Asked what sort of relationship they would like moving forward, Isamel Hlahleh noted that the occupation is the primary threat they face, and any efforts that partners can make to pressure for an end to the occupation would be greatly appreciated. "Kharas Charitable Society is evidence that Palestinian society can govern itself at all levels. What we need now is for our international partners to deliver that message, because once the occupation is lifted, we will thrive."

So that is how a ring binder contributes to resilience and the sustainable development of a rural Palestinian community!

“ Kharas Charitable Society is evidence that Palestinian society can govern itself at all levels. What we need now is for our international partners to deliver that message, because once the occupation is lifted, we will thrive. ”

A platform for women and young people - REFLECT Groups

CBOs provide an important forum for women and youth, but these target groups also need their own space to develop their ideas, identity and priorities for building resilience. In response to this, ActionAid facilitated the establishment of 15 REFLECT groups across nine communities. Reflection-Action methodology can be described as a structured participatory learning process, which facilitates people's critical analysis of their environment, placing empowerment

at the heart of sustainable and equitable development. A wide range of participatory methodologies are used within REFLECT Circles to help create an open, democratic environment in which everyone is able to contribute.

The engagement of women and youth through REFLECT groups in Neighbourhood Corners resulted in their improved understanding of community needs and the root causes of problems faced by the community. Visualisation tools developed by the practitioners of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) are a central component of the REFLECT process. These include maps, matrices and other diagrams that facilitate group members to analyse their environment,



Karma youth REFLECT group identifying Karma's village rights and priorities through Reflection-Action session. October 2013. Photo: ActionAid.

identify the causes of the challenges they face, and the oppressive systems and structures that deny them their rights.

The Neighbourhood Corners REFLECT groups developed and promoted “PRA reports” through their own action research. This facilitated stronger levels of engagement between citizens and CBOs, which then benefited from stronger levels of community participation. REFLECT groups then prioritised issues to campaign around. Community-led campaigns were introduced to address bullying, school dropout rates, early childhood learning and support for children with learning difficulties in schools, as well as addressing the issues of unemployment, social accountability of CBOs, access to public transportation, and access to medical services.

Women REFLECT Group members – in their own voice

- “We’ve been provided training before but it was of no use because we didn’t understand the problems! Now we are researchers, and we understand issues so we can apply the training we have received and we are more committed to resolve them because we understand their importance so much more.”
- “Working as a group allowed us to mobilise the whole community around our issue. Once it was understood to be a concern of all the people in the community, authorities had no choice but to take action..... And once we achieved our first goal, it was easier to plan for our next goal.”

- “REFLECT has raised my awareness of my rights, and now I demand them, and tell others that they also have rights.”
- “Not only has REFLECT allowed me to get out in the community more, it has also increased my self-confidence, and now I raise issues within my family. This has made my family stronger and more secure.”
- “I now take time for myself and don’t run my life for my husband!”
- “I had ten children by the age of 30. I now know how important it is that my children never make the same mistake.”

One noticeably clever and confident participant waited her turn, since she wanted to explain the profound impact that REFLECT has had on her. “I was already confident and willing to speak out. But REFLECT has still taught me important skills. I now know I need to find the root causes of issues. I now understand that we need systemic change. The solutions I develop must be valid and lasting. I must prioritise my approach, then act by seeking support to achieve my goal.”

“ Not only has REFLECT allowed me to get out in the community more, it has also increased my self-confidence, and now I raise issues within my family. This has made my family stronger and more secure.

”

Supporting Women's Right to Inheritance

Rolled out in Hebron through Neighbourhood Corners, the inheritance campaign led by Asala is of profound importance to the whole of the oPt. The professionalism of the campaign was central to its success. Significantly, it achieved support from the Governor's office, which formally endorsed and supported the campaign and its objectives. Leading religious figures in the Governorate were also consulted and mobilised in support of the campaign. At community level, CBOs whose skills and capacity had been strengthened through support from ActionAid and ICP were strong supporters of the campaign.

An independent impact assessment of the campaign³ found that:

- Increased policy dialogue on the compulsory will relating to daughters' rights to inheritance appears likely to lead to it being included in the anticipated modified family law
- The campaign increased judges' knowledge of tactics being used to deprive women of their inheritance rights
- CBOs participating in the campaign achieved enhanced credibility within the community, and helped more broadly to promote women's rights
- Mainstream media were very interested in the campaign, and willing to engage with it and provide air time.

While considerable resistance to women's inheritance rights still exists, the program has ensured it is a hot topic of discussion, through which many important issues of women's rights can be pursued.

Giving Youth a Brighter Future

While much focus is placed on supporting women's economic and social empowerment, less focus has been placed by development agencies on the needs of youth, despite near record levels of youth unemployment in oPt. Recognising young people as key to the future, Neighbourhood Corners supported greater voice for youth, and provided practical skills and seed grants to enhance employment opportunities in Hebron.

Project support to CBOs provided opportunities for 29 women through jobs initiated through the six CBO income-generating activities. ICP's AFAQ (Horizons) program has also been effective in putting youth into employment. Of the 54 youth placed through the program, 36 are young women. It is worth noting the success of the program with over 65% employment retention rate after the subsidised period. The impact of the AFAQ model is greater than this number, since it is raising awareness among employer groups of the capacity of younger people, especially women, to help drive their businesses forward.

More than 390 young women and men applied for only 54 places for the first phase of AFAQ. The 350 who were not employed were invited to participate in a two day workshop to help them with interview skills, resume writing and understanding their rights according to the Palestinian labor law.

3. Advance Consulting Services; Impact Assessment Report – Asala Women's Right to Inheritance and Ownership Campaign, Feb 2014, p.2-3

Youth REFLECT Group members – in their own voice

- “Previously youth sat back and observed issues. They were not our responsibility to resolve. Now we research and understand these issues and take action.”
- “We used to all be volunteers in the CBO, getting told what to do by old men. Now we demand accountability and take responsibility ourselves.”
- “Before, society did not accept youth action in the community. But ActionAid has (sensitised) leaders to encourage and support us. It has been good for everyone in our community.”
- “I now know that the actions we pursue are embedded in the law, so it is difficult for the authorities not to listen!”
- “Because the action we take is evidence based and professionally presented, it is easier to navigate the tension that authorities might previously have felt.”
- “‘REFLECT’ now has credibility and opens doors. I worry that doors will close when the donor is not sitting in the background.”

Similar to the women’s group, a particularly impressive young (female) participant summed up REFLECT as follows: “Training has allowed our ideas and observations to crystalize. That has given us confidence, and confidence spurs us on to action. Our action has credibility because our training has been strong. That we are seen as credible gives confidence to authorities that we are capable and committed to achieving our goal.”

Building Social Capital

The concept of social capital has played a critical role in the success of the Neighbourhood Corners project. The OECD defines social capital as: “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups”. Much of what is written in this document relates to the importance of high levels of social capital being available within a community when working to support vulnerable people become more resilient. This is especially true if extremely vulnerable people are to be encouraged and supported through project activities.

Neighbourhood Corners has worked to strengthen levels of social capital within poor Palestinian communities, by addressing issues of marginalisation and inclusion. This has been achieved in large part through efforts to strengthen community structures, and support CBOs to truly understand, appreciate and action the values of inclusion and a whole of community approach to their work.

The result of these efforts has been increased respect for CBOs in the target area, resulting in social capital that “*facilitates coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit*”.

While social capital is to a large degree a matter of shared ‘values’, it is also the case that a community can be supported to develop and strengthen its levels of social capital. This can occur through identifying a sense of common purpose and need, but also through supporting communities to adapt their approaches to increase inclusion of previously excluded groups – such as women, youth and the most vulnerable.

A strong indicator of the presence of social capital is the willingness of people to volunteer within their community. While volunteerism is present in all Palestinian communities, it is clear that higher levels exist in communities that promote the values of inclusiveness, and provide meaningful opportunities for volunteers to participate. It is therefore the case that levels of volunteerism can be facilitated and sustained when there is considered support provided to a community.

The presence of increased transparency and social capital also generates trust. In the case of Shyouk community in Hebron, Neighbourhood Corners partner ICP worked closely with community factions to overcome a potentially debilitating divide within their community. By supporting the community to recognise that the whole community faced similar challenges, not only was reconciliation able to be achieved, but the community also decided to take united action in order to address its number one challenge – youth unemployment.



Al Fawwar Child Centre encourages active citizenship of teenagers through awareness raising sessions. Photo: ActionAid.

Planning for a better future in Shyouk

Shyouk is an ancient community famous for its stone masonry. A year ago when municipal elections were due to take place, the community divided along tribal lines with close to half of all potential voters choosing not to participate or vote in local elections. Recognising the threat this division posed to the community, ICP worked with the different factions to bring about reconciliation.

This was achieved through ICP initiating planning processes with each of the different factions of Shyouk to identify community concerns, issues and needs. The results of this process demonstrated that irrespective of political or tribal allegiance, community members had similar concerns and shared a similar understanding and vision for their community. This common understanding was used as the foundation for community reconciliation, from which a united strategy for the community's development was prepared.

To maintain the momentum of the reconciliation process, ICP worked with the community to establish the Shyouk Community Planning Committee as a mechanism for coordination and implementation of the strategic plan agreed to following the planning process. Importantly, this reconciliation involved not only the formal political factions of the community, but also brought other committed groups to the planning table such as women, youth and CBOs.

The evaluation team's meeting with the CPC, chaired by the Mayor, was tangible evidence of the levels of reconciliation achieved in the community. Representatives of different political factions, women and youth spoke supportively of each other and of a shared vision for their community. The energy, good humour and mutual respect shown in the meeting was further evidence of the success of the process of reconciliation, and people's commitment to work together moving forward.



Al Shyoukh Planning committee with the Independent evaluator, Scott Rankin, Dec2104. Photo: ActionAid.

The previous day, the CPC had initiated a workshop in relation to the community's number one issue of concern – youth unemployment. Invitations had been sent to key stakeholders, including the local business forum, religious leaders, government departments, municipal representatives, leading companies in the community, and most important of all – youth representatives. Each participating group was asked to present their perspective on the issue.

While workshops sometimes only result in words, this workshop came up with concrete action to address youth unemployment. Funds were committed to provide funding for graduates to commence small projects. Another fund was supported to provide resources to students in need. A career counseling program was to be commenced. And a scheme to make internship programs more effective was agreed to.

With strong, outcome focused facilitation by ICP, Shyouk is now not only reconciled, but capable of working together to resolve complex issues.

A key observation is that sustained and deliberate efforts to raise awareness and understanding within CBOs of the importance of heightened levels of participation for all, has had the snowball effect of strengthening the social capital present within these communities. An enabling environment has been facilitated, based upon the values of inclusion and transparency, including strategic identification of training and material needs.

Conclusion:

As is well understood, the oPt presents a uniquely complex operating context. It is also a context where *resilience* to navigate the many shocks encountered is vitally important.

While it is common for *resilience* programming in the oPt to focus on economic *resilience*, efforts at addressing vulnerability are significantly enhanced when high levels of social capital and strong community structures exist. This is particularly true in relation to efforts to support women, youth and other marginalised groups to become more active and engaged within their community. These groups speak proudly of the respect generated through Neighbourhood Corners for their opinions, and the momentum that it has generated for them to become energetic contributors to their community.

A key lesson learned is that meaningful transformation of community structures to be more inclusive and resilient requires sustained, deliberate and well researched interventions that respond to the specific needs of the target community.

The aim of this paper is to share learning to assist development actors and communities to better strengthen *resilience* in the current context of the oPt. Through this process it is hoped that effective strategies become better understood in order to improve outcomes for and with Palestinian women and men.

We have a future- we are agents of change.
Zakaria Mufreh- AAP volunteer with youth from
Jordan, Syria and Iraq. Photo: ActionAid.



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