

Palestinian Researchers Apply Evaluation Lessons to Land Use Project



Gaza City: urban landscape. (IDRC Photo: Peter Bennett)

2004-11-04

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The Palestinian people face the triple challenge of negotiating a just peace, building a viable state, and laying the foundations for sustainable development — all under adverse conditions. Over the past two years, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has sponsored two staff from the [Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem \(ARIJ\)](#) to attend the [International Program for Development Evaluation Training \(IPDET\)](#) in Ottawa¹. The training has provided triple benefits: strengthening research in land use, building evaluation capacity within ARIJ, and planting the seeds for an evaluation network involving Middle Eastern countries. Hosted by the World Bank's Operations Evaluation Department, and Carleton University's Faculty of Public Affairs and Management, IPDET 2004 attracted more than 200 participants from 75 developed and developing countries.

ARIJ promotes sustainable development in the occupied Palestinian territories and the self-reliance of the Palestinian people through greater control over their natural resources. Between 2002 and 2004 — building on earlier research supported by IDRC — ARIJ assessed the impact of rapid urbanization in the West Bank. The institute examined the availability of land and natural resources for Palestinian people and how this would likely affect the economy and local communities. Researchers surveyed community leaders and households, and studied satellite images to analyze both socio-economic issues and actual land cover.

The research revealed significant urban expansion over the past 13 years. Between 1989 and 2000, for example, Palestinian urban expansion in the West Bank increased by 133%. Israeli colonization has also had a major impact on available land.

With projected population increases, the expansion of built-up areas will likely continue. This poses a serious threat to natural resources, especially since Palestinians have little choice but to exploit agricultural land and build on water-sensitive areas. The project's results will help Palestinian planners and policymakers develop long-term strategies for sustainable urban development.

Evaluation training strengthens research and builds institutional capacity

Half way through the project — thanks to lessons learned at IPDET — ARIJ researchers began fine-tuning their methodology. Initially, for example, researchers doing surveys asked multiple-choice questions. After IPDET, they integrated open-ended questions to elicit anecdotes.

“The stories allow people to express their feelings and emotions, which deepens the research,” said Nael Salman. As director of ARIJ’s Settlement Unit, Salman attended IPDET 2003.

Salman shared lessons learned from IPDET with his ARIJ colleagues to strengthen the organization’s evaluation capacity. But he went further, encouraging colleagues like Sophia Saad to attend the program as well. “There is so much to learn, and the program changes every year, so I would like us to send someone to IPDET every year,” he said.

Saad, who attended IPDET 2004, oversaw the analysis of satellite images for the land use project. “Salman had explained the difference between outcomes and impact,” she recalled². “After attending IPDET 2004, I realized that when we wrote our conclusions and recommendations to the socio-economic analysis, he was using the format that he had learned here.”

The experiences of Salman and Saad at IPDET have ushered in a new kind of “evaluative thinking” at ARIJ. “We are taking evaluation into the research itself,” said Salman. “It is part of our whole process, rather than being something that we do after the project is over. Our research is becoming more systematic as well. We are basing our proposals on what we’ve learned about evaluation.”

Salman, Saad, and other IPDET participants are familiar with evaluation before they arrive at IPDET. The program, however, presents a systematic approach that puts their knowledge in context and fills any gaps. “I was comparing our work with what I was learning in the course and I noticed that we have been doing evaluation, but just not in a formal way,” said Saad. “It’s interesting to know that you were doing something based on experience that was actually scientific. We were doing it more or less correctly, but now we’ll do it properly.”

“IPDET has allowed us to deepen our thinking,” added Salman. “We learned how to ask the right questions. Before, we asked questions, but weren’t sure how to do it to look for the results we wanted. Now when we do evaluation, we do it a thousand times better than before.”

Building evaluation capacity beyond ARIJ

For Salman and Saad, IPDET provided opportunities to connect with like-minded professionals from around the world. The networking continues, however, long after the program wraps up. All participants are enrolled on a computer list-serve that helps them continue to build relationships, share experiences, and seek support.

Salman has joined together with several former IPDETErs to set up an evaluation network in the Mediterranean.

“We’ve applied to have a coordinating meeting in Italy in 2005. It’s still in its preparatory phase, but we hope that it will work and be effective.”

“IPDET presents a valuable opportunity for researchers and evaluators to consolidate their skills and to network with peers around the world,” said IDRC’s Sarah Earl. “We sponsor participants to strengthen our own projects, but also to help promote a culture of evaluation in the international

development community. Evaluation helps us reflect on what we do, and how we can be more effective.”

Evaluation that engages stakeholders and spreads knowledge can also reinforce good governance. “If it’s done well, evaluation offers people a chance to be empowered by the learning process and, ultimately, to influence policy,” Earl said.

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¹ In July 2004, IDRC’s Evaluation Unit sponsored 10 participants from organizations in the Czech Republic, Ecuador, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Philippines, and the West Bank and Gaza to attend the fourth annual IPDET in Ottawa. This is the second year IDRC has offered scholarships to partners. In addition, the Centre teaches a module on [outcome mapping](#).

² Impacts are the positive and negative primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention either directly or indirectly, and either intended or unintended. Outcomes are the likely or achieved short-term and medium-effects produced by an intervention’s output.