

**Workshop on Compensation as Part of  
a Comprehensive Solution to the Palestinian Refugee Problem  
July 14-15, 1999, Ottawa  
Opening Remarks by  
Maureen O'Neil**

I would like to welcome you on behalf of IDRC – the International Development Research Centre – to this "Workshop on Compensation Issues as Part of a Comprehensive Solution to the Palestinian Refugee Problem".

For many of you, this is not the first visit to IDRC, but rather a follow-up visit, after your participation in the Stocktaking conference on Palestinian refugee research, which IDRC and the Palestinian Refugee Research Net convened in December 1997. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the Centre, I'd like to take a few moments at the outset to situate this conference within the work of IDRC, which is dedicated to assisting developing countries to build the research capacity needed to address and resolve the problems they confront.

Created by an act of Parliament in 1970, IDRC is a crown corporation, at arms length from the Government of Canada. I like to say that IDRC is an asset for Canadian foreign policy, but not necessarily an instrument. IDRC has an international board of directors and staff in Canada and around the world representing a variety of backgrounds and cultures. Through our seven regional offices, and by maintaining direct contact with researchers and policy-makers, IDRC supports the efforts of people in developing countries, researchers, policy-makers, NGOs, to create, acquire and use knowledge. Our mission has been described as empowerment through knowledge. It is IDRC's modus operandi to bring together researchers and policymakers to facilitate an exchange of views often on sensitive issues, backed up by research and analysis.

One of IDRC's programs is the Expert and Advisory Services Fund, set up in 1992 as a Canadian contribution to the Middle East Peace Process and designed to support developmental aspects of the multilateral negotiations. The Fund supports work in the areas under discussion at the multilateral level – water resources, the environment, regional economic development and in particular, the Refugee Working Group, for which Canada holds the gavel. IDRC manages the Expert and Advisory Services Fund on behalf of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and works closely with both CIDA and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Indeed, this workshop is funded and organized through the Fund, thanks to CIDA, which we gratefully acknowledge. The Fund also supports the Palestinian Refugee Research Net and the FOFOGNET refugee discussion list, with which I know most of you are acquainted.

IDRC is not a newcomer to the Middle East. We have been doing projects in a number of

countries in the region since the beginning of the Centre in 1970. I had the opportunity in May to accompany three members of our Board of Governors on a mission to the Middle East, so that they could get a better sense of the kind of work IDRC undertakes and supports in the region. IDRC-supported projects in the West Bank and Gaza focus on strengthening the capacity of Palestinians to build and consolidate their institutions and to increase self-reliance in economic development and in management of natural resources. The projects seek to shape and influence policy in diverse development fields and disseminate research results to policy makers and Palestinian negotiators involved in the peace process. IDRC projects also, we hope, contribute to peace building through support to research on Palestinian refugees and to joint Israeli-Palestinian approaches to environmental issues.

We were able to visit a number of projects supported by IDRC in the West Bank and Gaza such as:

- the Women's Empowerment Project of the Gaza Mental Health Community Program which deals with the issue of violence against women in the Gaza Strip by using action-oriented research;
- a project led by the Jerusalem-based Palestinian Consultancy Group, concerning joint Israeli-Palestinian management of the mountain aquifer, which starts in the West Bank and flows under the 1967 Green Line to rise in Israeli territory;
- Palestinian Women in Society, a research program at Bir Zeit University supported by IDRC, working to promote and strengthen gender-based public policy research and analysis; and
- the Galilee Society for Health Research and Services/Israel which is seeking to develop sustainable strategies for the preservation of genetic material from medicinal and pesticidal plants in Israel.

Another project that is particularly relevant to today's discussion, is the effort to produce and disseminate resource material on Palestinian refugees and prepare the ground for needed research and policy strategies. IDRC is helping the Institute of Jerusalem Studies to preserve the UNRWA refugee archives and to render this data available to researchers, Palestinian civil society organizations and policy-makers.

And through our Expert and Advisory Services Fund, the Economic Cooperation Foundation in Tel-Aviv and the PLO Department of Refugee Affairs, are working to develop a detailed strategy concept and practical plan to bring the refugee issue onto the agenda of the Palestinian and Israeli public. The goal of this project is to educate both sides on the refugee issue and its various components through social history tours and public discussions on various components of the refugee circumstance.

One such component is compensation.

Compensation as an issue is not new in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. As you know very well, it was specifically identified as early as 1948 in UN Resolution 194 as a crucial element in the settlement of the Palestinian refugee problem. Nor is the concept of compensation novel in the international context. Indeed, the subject has some historical relevance for many Canadians – and I am not referring to payments made to Japanese Canadians many years after World War II. In 1794, the United States undertook to compensate royalists who fled to Canada at the end of the American revolutionary war, for the loss of property and damages suffered during the conflict. Some have suggested that this spirit of fair play laid the foundation for two centuries of peaceful and friendly relations across the world's longest undefended border (defended only by Customs and Immigration officials).

At the 1997 stocktaking conference, some participants were reluctant to engage in detailed discussion of compensation at all, for fear that it might compromise the rights of refugees. In the end, it was agreed that academic discussion of compensation should in no way constrain negotiators. In fact, this kind of discussion serves a useful function by helping to identify advantages and disadvantages of different compensation systems. Such a discussion in no way takes away from the other inherent rights of the refugees. It is hoped that, in the process, such a workshop can provide information that could be valuable to both sides in the negotiations of the peace process.

So here we are. The floor is yours, you are the experts. To help you frame your discussions, we have set an agenda for the two days that lie ahead. In the limited time that is available, we have suggested discussions of the legal dimensions of compensation, relevant international and domestic law and precedents, calculating Palestinian claims, finding the resources, adjudicating and distributing compensation, eligibility in the Palestinian case and finally the political constraints to compensation.

So, once again I welcome you to IDRC, and good luck in your deliberations.