



# RUWWAD Report

Youth Volunteers for Community Assistance

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Monthly News – December 2007/January 2008

## Youth-Led Aid Projects Bring Holiday Hope to Villages

The holiday season is never easy for families in need. Even in the West Bank, where the Muslim Eid al-Adha festival emphasizes giving to the poor, many households in rural areas found themselves without food or clothing during this year's four-day feast. Christian families also faced a bleak December 25<sup>th</sup>, as the economy in Bethlehem and other Holy Land cities continues to suffer.

But for a large number of households, December was a truly festive occasion—thanks to a youth-led aid drive by local Ruwwad sub-grantee “Ta’awon for Conflict Resolution”. Throughout the month, 24 young volunteers gave out winter clothes, warm blankets, and emergency food baskets to more than 2,000 needy families across the West Bank. The campaign responded to real needs expressed by the families themselves, during survey meetings held in the Fall of 2007. Given the success of this December drive, Ta’awon youth leaders are now planning to scale up the project—so that even more families in need can get critical aid, especially in the Northern West Bank regions of Jenin, Tulkarem, and Qalqilyah. Ruwwad will continue to provide funding and coaching support for the activity.



A Jenin family greets a Ruwwad-funded food delivery with smiles. 350 needy families received emergency food baskets during the youth-led aid campaign.

Meanwhile, at the door of one home, the holiday spirit was clearly visible on the faces of a Jenin family. “I can’t tell you how thankful I am,” offered one father of five as he accepted a food basket from local youth leaders. “With the [Eid al-Adha] feast coming up, this help couldn’t have come at a better time”. He continued “But two things really make this food drive different from anything I’ve ever seen before: First, young people are the ones who are leading it. Second, we were asked directly about the exact things we needed. Very few people have asked for my opinion before!”

Empowering local communities is a cornerstone of the project—thanks to the youth leaders’ insistence that villagers be included in all decision-making. “We heard this loud and clear from the youth leaders,” explains Rasha Fetyan, Capacity-Building Manager at Ruwwad partner Ta’awon. “So right from the start of our planning, we made sure the youth learned how to assess the humanitarian needs of local communities. This sped up the aid delivery process, and it also helped feed into one of Ruwwad’s overall goals—which is giving young people the tools to solve local problems”.

The holidays are now over, but basic challenges still plague families across the region. A new, sudden problem is the lack of good winter clothes and heating—as the Middle East struggles with a rare 35 degree (or near-zero Celsius) cold snap. Still, the work of Ruwwad and Ta’awon has clearly helped take the bite out of winter. “Children have blankets. Parents have coats. Families have food staples,” affirms Ruwwad sub-grant Coordinator Huda Tahboub. “This will make a big difference in homes that weren’t previously coping well. And it’s all thanks to the efforts of our youth”.

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## This Month In Brief

Seasonal Snapshot:  
December 07/January 08

### 25 Youth Pitch Projects at Year-End Competition

Ruwwad's third American Idol-style Social Business Plan Contest kept staff and youth busy in December. For three days right before the Eid al-Adha and Christmas holidays, 25 youth crammed into a Ramallah hotel meeting room—anxious for a chance to pitch their ideas to a panel of peer judges. Between staff-led sessions on teamwork and communication, teams of five presented their innovative solutions to local community problems: From rooftop gardens in Nablus to an employment campaign for the disabled, groups competed energetically for up to \$10K of in-kind support. Regardless of their team's outcome, all participants were inducted into the Ruwwad Youth Corps (RYC) at the end of the three-day contest and training event.

- Over 300 youth march in Ruwwad's Bethlehem-area Christmas parades.
- 25 new youth leaders take part in Ruwwad's "30/30" Advanced Leadership Training Course
- 22 young men and women featured in a regional TV program on youth volunteerism, in cooperation with Ruwwad sub-grantee "Civic Forum Institute".

"It was amazing," offered new RYC Leader Islam Khouli, when asked about the high-stakes competition. "Everyone was on the edge of their seats when the teams were speaking. It was so quiet in that room, you could hear a pin drop". She added: "But the contest was just one part of the experience. Personally, I loved the leadership training aspect...because I'd never been exposed to something like this before. Teamwork, decision-making—now I really know what these concepts are all about". Back at the judges' table, the "Smile of Hope" team erupted into cheers after learning that their campaign to help children with cancer had been chosen as the winner. "This is a dream come true," yelled team leader Bilal Mahboub, "not just for us, but for the kids we'll be helping. Thank you, RYC, for giving us the chance to help make our community a better place".

### The "Watan" Theater Project: Putting Social Issues On Stage

"We're raising awareness about problems in our communities, but in a way that really grabs people's attention". This is how Wafa'a Kmeil, the Ruwwad Youth Corps' Northern West Bank Youth Coordinator describes the ground-breaking "Watan" (or, "Homeland") theater project launched in early January in the Tulkarem area. The brainchild of six Ruwwad Youth Corps Leaders, this month-long activity tackles sensitive issues in Palestinian society—from parent-child dynamics, to violence in the home. But by framing problems in the context of a stage play, the youth leaders are making these topics more accessible to audiences.

"Domestic abuse is a taboo here; that much is clear," explains Kmeil. "Our hope, though, is that our viewers will feel more comfortable to talk about the issue openly and frankly if they've seen it on stage first. We provide the starting point for discussion". Adds youth leader Yusuf Hajj Qasem: "Even if there's no follow-up conversation at home, we know that our viewers are learning, just by being here. They get the message: Violence is not an effective way to solve your problems".

With volunteer coaching from well-known actress Moneera Zreiq, the "Watan" team will be taking these key lessons to 17 towns and villages in the Tulkarem area—a first for the region, and for participating youth.

### Youth Leaders Travel to Europe

In early December, Ruwwad Youth Corps coordinators took the project's youth empowerment model to Europe: At international conferences on volunteerism, Wafa'a Kmeil and Bilal Hassouneh acted as Ruwwad ambassadors in Denmark and Germany, respectively—showcasing the "30/30" youth training approach that has earned Ruwwad praise within the West Bank and abroad.

"Not only did we show Ruwwad to the rest of the world," explains Hassouneh, "but we are also coming back to Ramallah with new knowledge, ideas, and strategies that we'll immediately start implementing in the Ruwwad Youth Corps. For example, many of the European projects we learned about have a clear link between volunteering and the workforce. This is a superb idea, and we want to see how we can enhance our own model so that there's a stronger tie-in to job preparation".

What was it like to leave the West Bank for the first time ever? "Amazing, and also a bit scary," admitted Hassouneh. "But now my eyes have been opened to other ways of doing what we do; this is invaluable".



## A Closer Look: “Our Voices Heard” Ruwwad Youth Prepare for U.S. Exchange

“A life-changing experience” doesn’t even start to describe the trip that six Ruwwad Youth Corps Leaders will take in April: None of the young men and women has ever left the West Bank before, let alone travel to the United States. And the first-ever Ruwwad international exchange program, “Our Voices Heard”, won’t just be an average trip overseas: These youth will be exposed to high-profile U.S. political, business, and community leaders—people whom most Americans see in the newspaper, rather than face-to-face.

During the first half of the two-week exchange, the 20 – 25 year olds will travel to Minneapolis, Minnesota--where they will present the Ruwwad Youth Leadership Model at the 19<sup>th</sup> annual National Youth Leadership Conference, hosted by the U.S. National Youth Leadership Council. The Ruwwad youth “ambassadors” will also promote the Palestinian perspective on youth empowerment, and convey the dreams and challenges of their peers at home to the youth they meet in the U.S.



Youth leaders strike a pose during Ruwwad’s West Bank summer exchange program.

After Minneapolis, the group will travel to Washington, D.C., where they will meet members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, in addition to key decision-makers at the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Aspen Institute and the Case Foundation. The tour concludes in Boston, where visits to local youth clubs and the headquarters of the Education Development Center—the organization that implements the Ruwwad project—will provide chances for hands-on learning.

Getting chosen for the exchange was no easy task. Thirty-five Ruwwad Youth Leaders applied for the six spots; each applicant had to write detailed essays, in English, explaining how they would apply lessons learned in the U.S. to their communities at home. Twelve finalists were asked to go one step further: Before a committee of Ruwwad staff, youth had to make a spontaneous “pitch” for a volunteer leadership project they would carry out after their return to the West Bank. Then, judges asked some hard-hitting questions to ensure that youth were ready for some of the tough scenarios they might encounter outside the Arab world:

“How would you respond if someone asked you whether you were oppressed, as a woman in the Middle East?” one panelist asked a young candidate from Nablus, who had arrived in a headscarf and long, modest coat. “Easily,” she answered. “I would work with that person to explore what their thoughts are on ‘oppression’, and then I would educate them about the openness and tolerance that defines our Palestinian culture and tradition. Most importantly, I would stay calm and be sure not to take it personally”. The judges nodded in approval, and moved on to the next stage of the interview. The girl exhaled in relief.

“It was really nerve-racking!” said Linda Abu-Hilaweh with a grin, as she reflected on the successful interview that won her one of the six places. “But I couldn’t be happier to be going on the trip. I’m so thankful to Ruwwad for giving us this opportunity. It’s going to be a truly unique experience, something that will give us a break in our routine, and let us meet youth from all over the world. My whole life, I’ve only known the West Bank. That’s it! The U.S., for me, is something that you see on TV”.



Summer exchange participants lay a wreath at the tomb of former president Yasser Arafat.



How to bridge the gap between “Friends” or “E.R.” and the real-life America? “This is something we take very seriously,” explains Ruwwad’s Youth Development Specialist Sana Abu Bakr. “Before the group leaves for the U.S., they’ll be getting in-depth training on American culture and daily life, gender relations, and social challenges. They’ll also be learning communication methods and presentation skills—to get them ready for the Minneapolis conference. A lot of this training will be done by our North American staff in Ramallah, and by Palestinian peers who have lived in the U.S.—and understand what it’s like to be from the Arab world, but visit the West”.

Overall, Abu Bakr is optimistic that the exchange group will have a meaningful trip. This isn’t the first time that Ruwwad youth have traveled far from home: During the summer of 2007, Ruwwad Youth Corps leaders designed and led a West Bank Exchange program, which gave more than 50 young men and women the chance to visit cities and towns they’d never seen before—given Israeli restrictions on Palestinian travel within the region. At each stop along the way, Ruwwad youth pitched in to help local communities—either helping with town clean-ups, or painting murals on city walls.

“Our Voices Heard” is the next step toward Ruwwad’s overall goal of giving 1,000 youth the tools to become the next generation of Palestinian leaders. Expectations are high for the group of rural and urban young men and women: When they return from the U.S., they’ll be expected to “get cracking” with local projects that address community needs. But Yazan al-Nabulsi, one of the three young men chosen for the trip, isn’t too worried: “All my life I’ve waited for the chance to take a trip like this. I’ve thought about it in detail, and planned exactly how I’m going to help my city when I get back: I want to create a network that links young engineering graduates with jobs in the region, because we have many skilled engineers in Nablus, but not a lot of information about work”. He adds: “I know the U.S. trip will prepare me to move ahead with this project. It’s a perfect partnership: In America, they have the expertise we need; in the West Bank, we have the determination to create change and get our voices heard”.

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