

The Voice of Youth

صوت الشباب

Monthly News from EDC's
Palestinian Youth Empowerment Program -
Sept. 2008

Project Contacts:

Hisham Jabi,
Chief of Party
hjabib@edc.org

USAID CTO:
Fadi Khoury

Ruwad is funded by the US Agency for International Development, and is implemented by the Education Development Center, (EDC) Inc.

The Power of Youth: Thousands Gather to Celebrate International Youth Day at Festival Sponsored by U.S.-Palestinian Partnership

It's not every day that banner-waving youth march through downtown Ramallah in colorful costumes, or on stilts, or in full fencing uniforms complete with swords! But in late August, thousands of young leaders from across the West Bank did just that, parading through the streets to mark International Youth Day—using every possible mode of transportation: The National Youth Bicycle Club cycled on mountain bikes; the Sports Car Racing Union revved their engines, the Youth Equestrian Federation galloped along, and thousands of boy and girl scouts pounded the pavement by foot, to the beat of bass drums, trumpets, and cymbals. Among the throngs of bystanders who gathered to watch, the verdict was unanimous: This was the best parade ever staged in the West Bank.

Sponsored by the Ministry of Youth and Sport and the U.S.-Palestinian Partnership (through USAID, the U.S. Agency for International Development), Palestine's 2008 International Youth Day Celebrations marked a turning point in the lives of its young participants: "For the first time ever, we are showing the entire region that we have a voice, and a role to play in Palestinian society," explained Marwa, age 16, from Tulkarem. The young leader's words were hardly an exaggeration: Carried live on al-Jazeera TV, the Ramallah parade and celebrations were seen by millions of viewers across the Middle East and North Africa.



Young scouts lead the International Youth Day parade.

At a follow-up ceremony in the city's main soccer field, Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad addressed a crowd of thousands: "Now that you have raised your voices, you must show us how powerful you can actually be: We need more volunteerism among our youth; I call on all young people to help out in their local towns and villages--and as a start, I invite you all to assist our farmers during the upcoming olive harvest. This can be the kick-off to a new era of greater community empowerment and growth". Dr. Fayyad's words were echoed by Minister of Youth and Sport Ms. Tahanni Abu Daqqa, and USAID Mission Director Dr. Howard Sumka: "The U.S.-Palestinian Partnership is proof of our commitment to helping empower youth in the West Bank," Dr. Sumka told guests. "From the amazing show of talent and spirit I see here today, I am certain that we are investing our resources wisely, and that all of you young leaders will make a massive positive impact in your society."

The pride expressed by the guests of honor was only surpassed by the happiness of the youth themselves. Thikra Hamad, a young board member at the Partnership's Al Bireh Youth Resource Center, beamed as she rode in the parade on horseback wearing a traditional Palestinian wedding costume. For her, the day's events were a powerful way to showcase Palestinian youth culture, and bring thousands of youth together in a positive setting: "This is an incredible event," Hamad told local reporters. "We are young people working for the improvement of our communities and we deserve recognition just like everyone else. But to actually be here, showing adults all the positive energy we possess—now that's something unique!"

This Month In Brief

New Program Grants to Help Young Men and Women Build Skills at Four Regional Youth Centers

The paint is drying, the furniture is in place, and now the doors are about to open at the U.S.-Palestinian Partnership's new Youth Development Resource Centers. "But the real change will start when we have great programs available for the youth who spend time in these facilities," explains Partnership grants manager Huda Tahboub. Over the past several months, Partnership staff have been working closely with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Palestinian Ministry of Youth and Sport to prepare a mind-boggling array of programs and courses for area youth. From small business training, to advanced sports coaching, the activities will give local young men and women the chance to build a wide range of skills--while still having fun with friends after school.

To deliver its programs, the Partnership aims to draw on the expertise of local Palestinian non-profits: Ten organizations will receive USAID grants of \$30,000 each to carry out three- to four-month activity cycles. In early September, eligible non-profits met with Ministry staff, Tahboub, and other staff of EDC Inc. (the organization helping implement the Partnership) to learn about the grants, the Youth Centers, and the needs of local youth who spend time at the clubs. "We're excited by the number of creative proposals we received after the meeting," explains Tahboub. "These local non-profits have amazing ideas for youth activities—and it's hardly surprising, given their intimate knowledge of the youth sector here". Now the goal is to transfer this knowledge to staff at the Youth Centers: "We want these programs to be sustainable after the grants are done," Tahboub elaborates. "If all goes well, Center staff will learn from the grantees and be able to run these types of excellent, dynamic programs themselves in the long run".

Palestinian Women Journalists: An Asset to Society

By: Fatimah Ibrahim, National Youth Corps Volunteer

I am a journalist and I am a woman. Unfortunately, that combination sometimes makes people around me angry. Walking home from work with my stacks of papers and my computer, I often hear negative comments from people I pass on the street: Voices expressing their frustration at a woman who has decided to pursue the work she loves. Our society has certain expectations for how women should spend their time, and in what careers they should work. Many women who would like to become journalists are pressured into more "traditional" occupations. Even when women are able to resist these pressures, they may have trouble advancing in the field.

Given that women have already proven their abilities in many sectors of Palestinian society, I can't fathom how we can restrict females from entering the field of journalism! Young women are just as capable as young men to film a TV report or speak on the radio. If we stifle women's voices, this really only serves to hurt our communities and prevent progress. Female journalists must be applauded--not censured--for their work, and we must be accepted into society like all other professionals, both male and female. A key first step is public awareness-raising about the challenges that female professionals are facing, so that all Palestinians can begin to appreciate and accept their contributions.

Monthly Snapshot: Sep. 2008

- National Youth Corps leaders prepare to welcome 320 new Corps members in a Ramadan Recruitment Drive.
- 2,650 youth take part in the Ministry of Youth's International Youth Day celebrations in Ramallah.
- Over 100 National Youth Corps volunteers launch fundraising activities in Bethlehem and Tulkarem, as part of the "Smile of Hope" cancer awareness campaign.

Profile of a Youth Leader: Yusuf al Haj Qassim

Yusuf al Haj Qasim is an unlikely success story: A young man from the remote Tulkarem area, he's grown up with almost no options for recreation and few role models. "My region always gets forgotten," he explains with a smile. "There's pretty much nothing for young people to do here. No movie theatre, no mall, no parks; nothing".

But despite a lack of choices in his own life, the 23 year-old distance education student at al-Quds Open University has now become a role model for peers across the West Bank—thanks to his efforts to create new opportunities for others: This month, Yusuf worked with close to 30 other National Youth Corps leaders to launch a regional cancer fundraising drive in Tulkarem, as part of the Corps' country-wide "Smile of Hope" Campaign for pediatric cancer care. "Without exaggeration, I think this was the biggest event to ever hit our town," Yusuf relates. "We just showed people that it doesn't take much to get youth active and involved for a good cause; all you need is the desire and the motivation".

Taking Action: Jericho Hosts a Planning Summit for the Ministry of Youth and Sport

In a country where two-thirds of the population is under 30—but where there's no strong national strategy for youth development—the challenge of giving young people a voice in society can feel overwhelming. “You almost don't know where to start,” explains Marwan Bashiti, one of the the U.S.-Palestinian Partnership Coordination staff. Bashiti's task is not an easy one: He's helping channel U.S. in-kind resources to the Palestinian Ministry of Youth and Sport, so that the Ministry can begin to build a first-ever national network and strategy to engage the young majority here. This massive plan for change includes the construction of four Youth Development Resource Centers, the creation of a National Youth Corps, and the launch of local programming in over 80 youth clubs across the West Bank. But none of this work can proceed without a clear strategic vision for the youth sector.

This month, however, that vision began to take shape—thanks to a crucial meeting in Jericho which brought together Ministry decision-makers and staff from EDC Inc., the organization that's helping deliver capacity-building training to the Ministry, through support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). In closed-door sessions, participants shared their thoughts on

the future of Palestinian youth. They also began to flesh out their plans for a new approach to youth development that gives young men and women new rights and opportunities. “We want to focus on four main areas of activity,” explained Walid Atatrah, the Ministry's Director General for Youth: “The Ministry's priorities are to create more chances for youth to get involved in their communities, to create more gateways to training and employment, to support cultural activities, and to promote leadership development”.

Transforming this vision into reality is difficult. In a society that's been dominated by adult voices and outside ruling powers for centuries, civil servants are quickly realizing that change can't always be created overnight. But the Ministry and the Partnership are committed for the long term. “We don't think about youth in terms of five or ten years,” offers Osama Abu Kirsh, the Ministry's Deputy Director General for Youth. “We think about a lifelong journey, and the resources they need to succeed on this journey—whether in the workplace, in their families, or in society at large. That's why this meeting is so significant: We are mapping out a plan for action that will stretch far into the future”.

How do local youth feel about the Ministry's new plans? “It's really encouraging to see that the Ministry of Youth is committed to improving the prospects for young people in this country,” reflects Ramzi Barhoum, age 29. An active leader in the National Youth Corps, Barhoum has been helping organize an upcoming series of environmental awareness activities for the Ministry's Youth Development Resource Centers. “People outside Palestine often forget that our government here is young: We've only had a Ministry of Youth and Sport for about 15 years, and so we have to be reasonable in our expectations about what it can provide for us”. Still, Barhoum is optimistic: “The Jericho meeting shows that adults in our society are interested in our well-being; they care about our future and are investing resources to make sure that future turns out well”.

Back in the Jericho meeting rooms, participants are having a heated discussion about identity and branding for the Ministry's new Youth Centers. “I think we need one unifying symbol for all of the Centers and clubs across the West Bank,” argues one Ministry staffer. Heads nod in agreement. “Amazing,” says Atatrah. “I've never seen people get so passionate about youth before. You're seeing real change happening right here”.



Planting the seeds of youth empowerment: a long-term commitment.

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is produced by the Education Development Center (EDC) Inc., West Bank/Gaza

For more information, please contact
Education Development Center (EDC) Inc.
P.O. Box 3866 Al-Bireh
Ramallah, West Bank
Tel: +970 2 242 3541

www.ruwwad.org