

**Land and People focuses on its namesakes**

**AUB professor has sparked series of initiatives to help rural areas stand on their own feet**

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AITA AL-SHAAB: In August 2006, American University of Beirut (AUB) professor Rami Zurayk borrowed a motorbike and rode to South Lebanon to visit some of the villages hardest hit by the 2006 summer war with Israel. Many of the roadways heading south had been bombed so Zurayk often traveled through the mountains.

"There were no [passable] roads and I wanted to help immediately," he said.

Dozens of villages had been virtually destroyed in the fighting and fields were littered with unexploded cluster bombs. Zurayk quickly realized that many rural livelihoods, particularly those dependant on farming and agricultural production, were in desperate need of help.

Zurayk, a well-known member of Lebanon's progressive environmentalist community, quickly set up mobile clinics to deliver supplies and know-how to communities and farmers across the South, beginning in Aita al-Shaab and Aytaroun and moving to dozens of other villages below the Litani river.

As his development work took shape, Zurayk labeled the project Land and People, and partnered with Samidoun, a group comprised of many former AUB students who worked to provide services to the South throughout the war.

Over the last two years, Land and People has grown into a fluid and far-reaching organization, helping hundreds of farmers and producers to rehabilitate their lands and introduce organic agricultural practices.

It is one of several development-driven groups, most coordinated through AUB, that are working to promote conservation, biodiversity and agricultural sustainability in some of Lebanon's poorest, rural areas.

Land and People is made up of three mobile clinics, each headed by an engineer who works directly with farmers in Southern villages. Each clinic was designed to reach 200 farmers, producers and families, and to increase their yearly income by \$500.

"Destroying people's livelihoods, as Israel did in the war, can only be responded to by building people's livelihoods," Zurayk said.

A New York-based group of Lebanese-Americans known as SEAL, the Italian non-profit organization UCODEP and Germany's Heinrich Boll Foundation have provided financial support for the work.

According to Zurayk, each clinic costs \$25,000 a year. But he noted that when the costs are seen through the additional profit for each farmer or producer (what Zurayk termed "livelihoods"), the project has a net return of 400 percent.

"We have met, actually exceeded our goals," he said.

Land and People's mobile clinics visit farmers across the South daily. In Deir Qanoun, just south of Tyre, a farm destroyed in the 2006 conflict was rebuilt into a women's cooperative. Twenty-five women work the land, growing vegetables and herbs and making traditional bread. All of the products are grown organically and certified by Libancert, Lebanon's organic certification body.

"We can't give them money but we give them the tools and teach them the practices," said Khalil Ollleik, one of Land and People's three engineers.

Several kilometers down the road, a citrus grower, Ahmad Chebli, greeted Khalil and Hassan Hamzeh, another engineer, warmly. He had been planning to cut down his citrus trees before Khalil helped him rehabilitate his soil, which had very high PH levels.

Land and People engineers took soil samples back to AUB for analysis and returned with recommendations.

"When Khalil came, everything changed," said Chebli, who has also become an organic farmer.

Closer to the Blue Line in Chemaas, the engineers visited Mohammad Srour, a large frik producer. Srour spoke about the amount of farming land that had been destroyed during the war. Along with aiding in rehabilitation, he said that Land and People had helped him market his frik, made by burning green wheat, at farmers' markets and shops in larger urban areas.

This is another of Land and People initiatives - to help farmers reach larger markets and to directly connect producers and consumers, part of what Zurayk called "tinkering the value chain."

Nowhere is this goal more visible than in Aita al-Shaab, where Land and People established a women's cooperative to make laurel oil and soap. Women from the village harvest the laurel seeds and extract the oil, by traditional methods - boiling them slowly and lading the potent extract.

The soaps and oils are marketed in Beirut, at places like the popular Souk al-Tayeb farmers' market and Healthy Basket, an organic foods boutique that Zurayk helped start.

"[In 2006] the whole place was littered with cluster bombs," Zurayk recalled. "The women harvested the laurel before they had been cleared."

Land and People also has a strong presence in Aytaroun, where engineers have helped farmers purify water and transplant trees; and around Nabatiyeh, where large crops of zaatar are grown.

"I developed Land and People, alone, as a citizen of Lebanon," Zurayk said, adding that it still abides by its original aim to build the livelihood assets of rural farmers, particularly those affected by the conflict.

As Land and People grew, Zurayk decided that it might work more effectively if it were directly tied to AUB.

"AUB had connected itself during the war to small development projects ¼ I thought we could consolidate the through a bigger, AUB-based multi- faceted organization," he said.

So Land and People became a part of IBSAR, AUB's Initiative for Biodiversity Studies in Arid Regions.

According to its director, Salma Talhouk, IBSAR is an interfaculty, interdisciplinary center devoted to "conservation and biological diversity."

The center, which has grown from a staff of four people to more than 20, works with professors, scientists and specialists in a number of fields.

IBSAR has partnered with foreign schools like the University of Helsinki and the University of Toledo to invest traditional knowledge with up-to-date research and biotechnology, in an effort to explore the bioactive and medicinal properties of native species. It also works to monitor and conserve Lebanon's biodiversity and promote sustainable uses of biodiversity (the program under which Land and People falls).

One of IBSAR's more high-profile campaigns is the Seeds of Hope, Trees for Tomorrow project. The project's objective is to create a nationwide tree and shrub field bank and to engage local communities in conservation projects.

Through Seeds of Hope, IBSAR plans to help more than 100 municipalities plant 50,000 native trees by 2010, in what Talhouk called "community forest field banks."

"If you plant something and see it grow, it's different than treating it an abstract way," Talhouk said. "It is the people who will conserve ... This won't happen unless they feel compelled to participate."

Although IBSAR is playing in active role, helping municipalities participate, Talhouk said that she hopes villages and citizens will eventually take the lead in the project, and adopt a lifestyle of conservation.

Talhouk said that the center aims to work differently than donor-driven NGOs and international organizations, by creating a lasting connection between the people and the land - a sentiment that Zurayk echoed.

She added that native species are under considerable pressure in Lebanon, often enhanced by economic needs. It's important, she said, to find the right way to move forward. "to find the balance between human needs and conservation." IBSAR bases much of its work out of AREC, AUB's Agricultural Research and Education Center in the Bekaa Valley, often referred to as the AUB Farm. It created the first national seed bank and grows many of the seedlings for Seeds of Hope at the extension campus.

Zurayk, a professor in AUB's Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences (which founded AREC in the early 1950s), was recently named the head the facility and he now runs Land and People out of AREC. He has plans to expand its development work into the Bekaa.

AREC is a fully functioning campus and farm, growing corn, alfalfa, barley, wheat and olives and raising chickens, cows and sheep. Much of the produce from the farm is sold at AUB's Beirut campus. FAFS students each spend a semester studying at the facility. A great deal of research and community outreach also takes place at the Bekaa campus.

The proximity of the facility to some of Lebanon's poorest agricultural-dependant communities in Baalbek, Akkar, Hermel and the Western Bekaa, what Zurayk called "the country's misery belt," allows AREC to reach out quickly to communities in need.

Indeed, AREC regularly holds seminars for local farmers to improve their farming techniques. Late this fall, 12 farmers attended one such seminar on organic farming and traditional dairy production.

"We've learned that we do everything wrong," one of the farmers said, smiling. They all seemed grateful for the help.

"Farming occupies an important role, even if it is only 30 percent of income," Zurayk said. "Our incentive is our commitment and passion and our beliefs that the livelihoods of people can improve with minimal knowledge."

Zurayk expressed the hope that Land and People could a responsive outreach tool for AREC, which he described as the only center in the region to focus on "sustainable food systems."

"Our focus is the well-being of the whole population," he said, adding that projects like IBSAR and Land and People, devoted to ecological harmony and balance, could indirectly influence notions of sovereignty, freedom and citizenship.

Speaking of his work, Zurayk asked: "Do you position yourself in social activism that is essentially political? Or do you create a space for yourself?"

AREC and the programs run with and through it help to create this space, he said. "Being involved in social change without having to defer to sectarian interests," he explained, "to me this is how you build a citizen."