

Jason Ben-Meir: In the Common Interest

Palestinian and Israeli groups indicated support for increasing Palestinian economic self-reliance, because it serves the interests of both peoples.

By Jason Ben-Meir
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NEW YORK (TPC) - The ultimate victor in the War of Ideas is likely to be the ideology or political philosophy that consistently translates into socio-economic, political, and cultural development for the people, en masse. This is a vital time for the United States to show the Muslim World that it is, in fact, serious about the pursuit of democracy by supporting broad participation by Palestinians in the development of their communities. The United States should encourage Hamas to focus its energy on participatory community development projects in Palestine that are entirely based on public participation.

U.S. President George Bush in his second Inaugural Address in January 2005 articulated the foundations of U.S. interests when he asserted that the expansion of freedom is within the U.S. national interest, and he committed the country "to seek and support democratic movements." Fortunately the community of professionals engaged in promoting international development has developed community planning tools, called Participatory Community Development (PCD) programs, that in their application would exactly satisfy the national interests of both the United States, as expressed by the president, and countries in the developing world, including Palestine. PCD programs meet the president's objective of supporting democratic movements. At the same time they deal realistically with improving the lives of the people at the community level. The Islamic movement in the Gaza and the West Bank may be amenable to this approach to development, since the majority of their activities are in community services.

PCD is a family of interactive activities involving entire communities in planning development projects to address their priority needs. These methods have already been applied successfully in thousands of locations in extremely diverse political and cultural situations. Applications range from parents and teachers in East Timor who planned and implemented a process to improve education, to a women's group in Albuquerque, New Mexico, that planned and now manages a drug rehabilitation program in its neighborhood that involves entire families. PCD programs, if they would be widely implemented in Palestine, hold the promise of laying the foundations for Palestinian socio-economic self-reliance, a "Third Way" political movement, and a reduction of tensions with Israel.

A new PCD empowerment drive in the Palestinian areas would satisfy the policy and themes put forward in President Bush's Second Inaugural. This drive would in effect be a democratic movement characterized by community decision-making that leads to projects exemplifying the "governing of the self," which, according to President Bush, is "America's ideal of freedom."

The community-driven approach to local and national development is the fruit born after decades of time and hundreds of trial and error development interventions around the world. Looking beyond the billions of dollars and oceans of good intentions invested in trying to aid development in impoverished countries, the most important lesson of all these experiences is simple yet profound: truly sustainable development projects are those in which local communities (neighborhoods and villages) are included in determining and managing projects that generate socio-economic, environmental, and political benefits at the local level. The reason is simple: local people working together to decide their own development priorities, and then to develop and implement an action plan to achieve them, naturally gives the local people a vested interest in the results.

Achieving such results requires an investment first in the training of selected local people in the vision of PCD and the methods for catalyzing community dialogue and helping ensure that the entire process is inclusive and productive. Schoolteachers, government extension agents in agriculture, health workers, non-government community workers, community members and leaders, politicians, and others are all good potential candidates for receiving this invaluable training as facilitators. They become skilled at guiding group discussions and actions that are inclusive, interactive, and collaborative.

By participating in developing and implementing their own development program local people achieve what in development parlance is called "self-reliance." They claim program ownership and learn how as a community they can make informed and effective decisions related to planning development projects that meet their needs. Such self-reliance in development often is then translated into economic self-reliance.

Self-reliance is of particular importance when considering the Palestinians' socio-economic conditions and possible strategies for addressing them. Although PCD, mostly assisted by NGOs, is already underway at a very modest level in Palestine, many conditions there militate against the success of these programs. Despite the obstacles, however, this is the strategically right moment when PCD needs to be dramatically expanded among Palestinian communities.

Palestinian and Israeli groups (from both the right and left) have indicated support for increasing Palestinian economic self-reliance, because it serves the interests of both peoples. For the Palestinians, increasing self-reliance would enhance the peoples' ability to determine their own fate by transitioning away from their present obligatory dependence on the actions and policies of another more dominant economy. For Israel, increasing Palestinian self-reliance promises to further regional development while diminishing the challenges to Israel posed by Palestinian economic dependency.

The Palestinian economy is completely integrated with, and dependent on, Israel's. During the second Intifada, trade and labor restrictions and closures imposed on the Palestinians by Israel to enhance its own security have wreaked economic havoc on the majority of Palestinians, dramatically underscoring their economic vulnerability and further destabilizing the two countries' political relations. Ravaged by poverty, declining health, and environmental devastation, two-thirds of the Palestinians now depend on humanitarian aid to survive. Labor surveys put the current unemployment rate in the Gaza strip at fifty percent (per capita income in Gaza is about half of what it was in the late 1990s).

The Bush Administration should support PCD by directly funding local Palestinian non-governmental organizations and other local groups (including private) that support community development. Using "America's influence, confidently in freedom's cause," as President Bush stated, involves being proactive and willing to pay the cost. This may not seem like an obvious time for an increase in support for PCD projects in Palestine. But the cost of implementing PCD widely in Palestine would be a relatively small investment. The investment, however, could set in motion major economic and political development among Palestinians and alleviate suffering in a sustainable way. It is likely that more foreign donors would be forthcoming if PCD processes were in place. If fully funded (\$500 million is a reasonable projection to positively impact each Palestinian community in Gaza and the West Bank), a PCD mobilization can be quickly catalyzed (through massive training in development facilitation and other measures), and experiences show that real benefits can be generated in only months.

PCD across Palestinian communities is just what the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the region needs if the ongoing spiral of conflict is to be reversed into a spiral leading toward regional peace. Implementing PCD in Palestine with communities that are in dire need goes to the very heart of the struggle between the Muslim World and the West, and is profoundly in the two cultures' common interest. PCD actualizes the promise of democracy as it also alleviates the suffering of a people through self-reliance. The wide implementation of PCD at this time in Palestine is the step that can claim the election of Hamas not as an insurmountable obstacle on the path to peace, but as a pivotal stepping-stone along the way

-Jason Ben-Meir is President of the High Atlas Foundation, a non-profit organization that promotes community development in Morocco. He contributed this article to PalestineChronicle.com

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