



Herders are traditional users of land in Arsaal

Lebanon's ESDU: Championing research for development

Although Lebanon's 15-year civil war ended in 1990, the country continues to endure political unrest. Nevertheless, the Lebanese people persevere in their efforts to create a sense of normalcy in their lives and to contribute to the development of their country.

It was in this post-civil war era that a small group of unconventional researchers at the American University in Beirut (AUB) decided that their work could — and should — address development challenges within the country. In 1995, with funding from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the research team moved out of the laboratory and into the

field — literally. Gathering a multidisciplinary team of experts, the group departed for the largely ignored northeastern district of Arsaal, to assess the various factors affecting natural resources management in the region.

Conflict over land use

The stone-fruit trees, mainly cherry and apricot, introduced in the region in 1952 by a local resident called the Cherry Man soon proved to be a lucrative agricultural venture. Fifty years later, Arsaal's two million trees provided a major source of income for 60 percent of its population.

An IDRC-funded research project in an isolated, poverty-stricken region in northeastern Lebanon has had far-reaching impacts. From introducing a dynamic new research approach for managing natural resources in the Arsaal district, to the creation of Lebanon's Environment and Sustainable Development Unit, the legacy of that initial project is being carried out by a new generation of researchers.



Participatory approach, a project legacy

ESDU

But the traditional users of the land, the animal herders, were severely affected. Fruit farmers had enclosed large swaths of land for their tree growing, leaving less and less land free for animals to graze on. At the same time, rock quarrying began in the region, smothering the fruit trees in dust. Concerns mounted about soil degradation resulting from the expanding local fruit industry.

To address these conflicting interests, the researchers decided on a participatory approach to their research. They embedded themselves in Arsaal, sometimes spending prolonged periods of time with the community, gaining the confidence of the local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), farmers, and other community members, and working with the people to develop evidence-based solutions.

The ensuing results and outcomes were unprecedented for the region: local users' networks were established, the local municipality was revived, and practical solutions for natural resources management were identified by the participating groups and implemented by the local community.

Institutionalizing a legacy

The project's legacy went far beyond the boundaries of Arsaal. The multidisciplinary, participatory research process was so successful that the group decided to institutionalize the approach. In 2001, a new multidisciplinary group, the Environment and Sustainable Development Unit (ESDU), was established at the AUB. In collaboration with other faculties, donors, research institutes, and NGOs, the ESDU would deliver programs in research, education, training, and outreach. Ultimately it would become a regional centre of excellence in sustainable development.

"We say that we employ participatory techniques, but in the real sense of the term this approach is not practiced widely in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. We live in a very compartmentalized region and most of the research

carried out is disconnected from reality. And we have individualistic tendencies. This is where participatory multi-action research comes in as the optimal plan. Participation is the perfect solution where each can find his own place yet at the same time give so much more through collaboration than if the researcher was working alone," says Ziad Moussa, ESDU's communications officer.

When the ESDU was created within the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences (FAFS) at the American University of Beirut, the AUB had just recently launched a master's degree program in environmental sciences that depended heavily on interdisciplinary approaches in its research activities. FAFS and other AUB faculties were also working on several projects related to natural resource management and sustainable development. It was this, coupled with the success of the Arsaal project, which created a positive environment for the establishment of the ESDU. "I felt it was time for the university to build on its experience and get all these researchers working together on real-life development projects to come up with community-based solutions," says Nuhad Dagher, the dean of the FAFS and one of eight ESDU founding members.

IDRC's long-standing strategic partnership with the AUB helped facilitate the Unit, says Shady Hamadeh, ESDU director and founding member. A visit from the AUB president to IDRC's head office and IDRC's support for the idea of establishing the ESDU at the AUB were among the factors considered in making the final decision, explained Hamadeh.

Although the AUB had initial concerns about costs and the ESDU's ability to support itself, says Dagher, it did agree to provide modest financial support in the form of office space and a part-time research assistant. Since those modest beginnings, the ESDU has established itself as a regional centre of excellence in sustainable development. It now has a team of four full-time employees: a director, a capacity-building and communications officer, a financial officer, and an information and dissemination officer. In addition, each ESDU project has its own manager.

A virtual network across MENA

Through the various projects it has been involved in since its inception, the ESDU has created a large virtual network of researchers from the AUB, other Lebanese universities, and other research institutions in the MENA region. This pool of researchers is widely called on to exchange experiences in sustainable development research, as a resource for a variety of multidisciplinary research for development projects, and for its collective expertise in regional training workshops.

ESDU team members emphasize that one of their concerns is “localizing” research approaches that they have learned from the West.

“The development challenge we faced [in Arsaal] was how to build livelihoods on precarious natural resources in an uncertain region,” explains Shady Hamadeh. “We wanted to introduce new paradigms. We look at paradigms coming from the West and then we adapt them to be more suitable for the region,” he says. Hamadeh says most development approaches from the West are “parachuted” into the region regardless of whether they are suitable for the local realities. Gender and sustainable environmental approaches developed elsewhere, for example, are not easily transplanted to the MENA context, he believes. The ESDU takes these various approaches and adapts them to the socio-cultural realities of the region. “This is what we do best,” says Hamadeh.



Regional farmers and scientists travelling workshop

ESDU

A centre of excellence emerges

Two successful cases illustrate this regional “contextualization” of approaches to research for development.

One is the work that the ESDU has been doing in localizing or “Arabicizing” the Outcome Mapping approach developed by IDRC to monitor and evaluate research projects. In June 2007, the ESDU conducted a workshop on “Introducing and Exploring the Applicability of Outcome Mapping in the MENA Region,” a title that perfectly reflects ESDU’s philosophy. Twenty-four participants from NGOs, international agencies, and research bodies in MENA took part in the three-day workshop, learning about outcome mapping and discussing its applicability as a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tool in the region.



Urban agriculture regional workshop in Amman

ESDU

needed an entity to host training on urban agriculture in the region, they approached the ESDU,” he says.

Participants cautiously agreed that monitoring and evaluation face many challenges in the region, particularly the absence of an M&E culture and a lack of awareness of their importance in strengthening program outcomes. This culture could emerge if several enabling factors were present, such as donors mainstreaming M&E as an essential project management tool. An important outcome of the workshop was the creation of an outcome mapping “wiki page” that allows users to see colleagues’ translations of common outcome mapping terms and to add their own translations.

A second case in point is a large ESDU project promoting urban agriculture in the region. “Urban agriculture is a totally new concept in MENA,” Moussa says. “We normally consider agriculture to be a rural occupation. When IDRC

Expanding horizons

The ESDU started off by identifying regional experts in urban agriculture. It then worked on developing region-appropriate curricula on the topic, followed by the selection of eight “city teams” — composed of a researcher, a municipal officer, and a private sector representative — to participate in the program. Workshops were conducted over a



Capacity-building network exhibition at AUB

period of 21 days in three cities (Beirut, Damascus, and Amman) so as to capture different aspects of urban agriculture in the region. Participants demonstrated the knowledge they gained by implementing urban agriculture projects in their cities.

One of the outcomes of this program was the creation of the Arab Network on Urban Agriculture, which is now hosted in Amman, Jordan. As a result of its role and networking activities during the development of the program, the ESDU became the seventh resource centre in RUAFA, the network of resource centres on urban agriculture and food security in the developing world.

“This opened a whole new horizon to continue working with cities on urban agriculture. It provided a sustainable mechanism,” says Moussa. Also, one of the project’s city teams is now allocating \$CA1.2 million to implement an urban agriculture project from funding provided under IDRC’s Focus Cities Research Initiative. “This is an example where training gave state-of-the-art knowledge on a totally novel subject, urban agriculture — *in Arabic* — and empowered the teams involved to position themselves in other programs,” says Moussa.

Other projects run by the ESDU include the creation of a capacity-building network for community development, hosting the Lebanese National Training Unit (NTU) of the Near East Management Training in Agriculture (NEMTA), and capacity building for sustainable animal production. The ESDU has also gained international recognition. The Mediterranean Development Forum acknowledged the ESDU’s “Sustainable Livelihoods in Drylands” Community of Practice (CoP) in its 2002 Communities of Practice Competition. This ESDU CoP aims to provide an enabling framework to ensure continuous discussion and information exchange for the promotion of sustainable livelihoods and human development

in dryland areas. It is comprised of researchers and development practitioners from Jordan, West Bank and Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. It also includes policymakers, development agencies, and community-based organizations active in promoting sustainable livelihoods in the drylands.

Future challenges

The ESDU sustains itself on a project-by-project basis. In addition to the support it has received from the AUB and IDRC, its projects have also been funded by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, USAID, the United States Department of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Agriculture in Lebanon.

And its team has high hopes for the future. The ESDU team wants to formalize its training by establishing an Institute for Participatory Development. “Now that we have an account line, we can receive funding. This makes us formal in the eyes of the AUB. We can now start establishing entities under the umbrella of the ESDU in the future,” says Moussa.

Moussa believes that the main obstacle facing the ESDU is the political uncertainty in Lebanon. “You can’t plan,” he explains. But experience has shown that even this obstacle can be overcome. The team at the ESDU has learned to be versatile in conducting its projects anywhere in the region when necessary and at full capacity. “Even if the going gets tough in Lebanon, we’re quite regional now,” he says.

“The ESDU is an initiator of sustainability beyond each of its projects’ lifespans and it has had many impacts,” concludes Shady Hamadeh, ESDU’s director. “Our philosophy is to link and to embed research into development. The processes of research and development should be intertwined. And it’s possible to conduct such projects with very little resources.”

This story is a condensed version of a longer feature by Cairo-based journalist Nadia El-Awady.

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