Evaluation of Environmental Peacemaking Intervention Strategies in Jordan-Palestine-Israel

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Introduction
EcoPeace Middle East (formerly Friends of the Earth Middle East) is a leading practitioner of environmental peacemaking and water diplomacy with over twenty years of experience in conflict resolution through the development of cooperative strategies to address shared water and environment challenges. Working in an ever changing political context presents a set of unique challenges to sustainable peacemaking, and requires the continuous adaptation of approaches. This briefing shares key insights from the latest external evaluation of EcoPeace’s program building on sustainable environmental solutions paired with enhanced trust and understanding in a conflict zone, and it presents a peacemaking model that can be applied to other conflict areas.

The Political Situation
The political situation in the three countries presents many challenges for cross-border operations. Rhetoric used in Israeli political campaigns instills a fear of Palestine: It is common for Palestinians to be referred to in derogative terms as a cancer or as terrorists (O’Connor 2015), and any criminal Palestinian is labeled as a terrorist to escalate the feeling of insecurity and advance the support of the occupation (BBC 2014; Eisenbud 2015). Many Israelis consider travel in Palestine to be dangerous. In Israel, there is mistrust towards and at times violence against Palestinians even when they have Israeli citizenship; it is common for this group to feel exposed, especially when speaking Arabic in Israeli public places. Some schools and workplaces attempt to exclude Palestinians from participation and by association; people working with Palestinians are met with mistrust. The conflict provides an overwhelming challenge and has caused the demise of many cross-border efforts.

Jordanian and Palestinian populations are increasingly isolated from Israel, both physically and socially. The occupation presents practical barriers, Jordanians must undergo a lengthy visa process to enter Israel; and, Palestinians need permits from the Israeli military to travel through Israel and Israeli controlled areas; similarly, the Israeli
government prohibits their citizens from traveling to Palestinian controlled areas. In Jordan and Palestine there is a constant, growing perception that people participating in cross-border activities are willing to accept the occupation with its injustice as the norm. As a result, peacemakers working within the current political context are labelled as traitors and ‘normalizers’: people working with the enemy to ‘normalize’ the current situation. The social pressure against ‘normalizing’ is steadfast and taking a solid hold both in Jordan and Palestine (Butterfly 2014). The July 2014 Gaza War between Israel and Palestine ignited an even higher level of mistrust and violence that might easily spark new conflicts.

On the political front, the region is characterized by conflict with many remaining unresolved issues. Israel fully controls more than 60 percent of the West Bank, including the vast majority of the western Jordan Valley. Palestinian agricultural production in the West Bank has fallen by 30 percent in the last two decades. According to the World Bank, the Palestinian economy would grow by one third if Palestinians had access to all of the land in the West Bank (World Bank 2013). The expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank has further increased pollution and conflicts over scarce resources.

**Regional Water Situation**

Israel, Jordan, and Syria have built dams and diverted water from the Jordan River Basin since the mid-20th century. In a 2010 study, EcoPeace found that riparian communities have diverted approximately 98 percent of the original flow (Gafny 2010). In addition, a significant portion of the flow reaching the Jordan Valley includes residential sewage, fishpond effluents, and agricultural runoff. The lack of progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace has left sustainable transboundary water management unresolved and the once mighty Jordan River has been reduced to a trickle of heavily polluted water. This poses significant environmental and health hazards.

**Good Water Neighbors: A Bottom-up Approach**

The ‘Good Water Neighbors’ (GWN) project was initiated in 2001 by EcoPeace to develop joint solutions to transboundary water resource challenges, and in the process diminish obstacles for peacebuilding between Palestinians, Jordanians, and Israelis. The GWN methodology is an original idea based on identifying cross-border communities and utilizing their mutual dependence on shared water resources as the foundation for developing dialogue and cooperation on sustainable water management (EcoPeace 2015a). The success of the program relies on working at the community level to identify practical win-win solutions that speak directly to local interests of all parties.

The project has four components:
1. Education of youth in water subjects (water use, pollution, management, and conservation) with a regional perspective, paired with conflict resolution, development of leadership and capacity for activism. These youth volunteers, called Water Trustees, participate in regional workshops, work on local environmental issues, and become local leaders and role models within their community. The Water Trustees play a major role in the development of eco-parks, the mapping of environmental hazards, the development and dissemination of information related to environmental issues, and the implementation of water saving programs, including rainwater collection and gray water recycling. The GWN project also trains primary and secondary school teachers and provides water conservation materials to complement existing educational curricula in the science and geography. A Community Geographic Information System provides high school students with the ability to map environmental hazards and document how pollution crosses borders with region wide effects.

2. Neighbor Paths developed by local communities delivering tours along shared water resources, highlighting the communities’ inter-dependence, common cultural heritage, and their need for cross-border cooperation towards preservation.

3. Facilitation of meetings between mayors, council members, municipal officials and employees, community leaders, and other adult residents to advance cross-border initiatives at the municipal level. These initiatives include the mapping and identification of sources of pollution, the development of solutions to protect the shared resources and heritage of cross border-communities, and advocacy for increased water supply.

4. Support for the development of Priority Initiatives: projects identified by local cross-border communities as having the potential to reduce tension between neighboring communities and deliver efficient sustainable management of water resources. These Priority Initiatives have attracted in excess of $450 million of financing to the region to address issues within sanitation, industrial pollution remediation, stream rehabilitation, environmental education, parks and open spaces (UNESCO 30:2013). EcoPeace supports these Priority Initiatives through forums and activities to educate decision makers for their support.

Cross-border activities take a variety of forms dependent on the target groups. There are mayoral conferences, GWN community meetings, conferences on specific environmental issues (such as the protection of ground water), cross-border visits for special interest groups to develop specific economic initiatives (such as tourism), and
youth camps. These cross-border activities seek to secure the people-to-people contact and the achievement of a common understanding of shared environmental concerns. In the process of working on sustainable water management, the participants develop skills, relationships, and understanding for the “other side.” Since 2001, EcoPeace has successfully expanded the program to include 28 communities across most of Israel, the West Bank and the entire Jordanian side of the Jordan River valley.

**Long Term Sustainable Solution**

Academics, donor communities and civil society organizations continue to struggle to identify direct pathways demonstrating causality between cross community trust building programs (like the GWN) and high level political change. Indeed this is a messy and long term process with series of challenges along the way. The results of the GWN program demonstrate that many of the participants underwent a process of change in their perspectives, they became increasingly open minded and adapted a wider regional understanding. Expanding common ground across the border is a critical contribution to the creation and of an enabling environment for change. Common ground reduces the individual’s and community’s risks associated with spurring regional decision makers for the necessary long lasting interventions that often requires political changes. Through a decade of grassroots work these political constituencies pushed sustainable water resource management on the agenda of regional decision makers.

The Jordan River basin exemplify the results of community wide engagement that identified, advocated, and advanced common solutions to cross border environmental challenges. EcoPeace widened the constituencies of support for a shared vision of a rehabilitated river across Palestine, Jordan and Israel. As more and more people articulate the geo-political, social and environmental benefits of investing in the river’s rehabilitation, the issue has garnered the attention of national decision makers and key world powers resulting in a shift in momentum towards rehabilitation. The question that regional decision makers now face is not whether fresh water will be returned to the river – but how much – with the Israeli government returning the first fresh water in 49 years in 2012.

> Through water and environment we can create true coexistence, based on respect and the protection of the rights of each side."
>
> – a sixteen-year old Palestinian boy (Butterfly 2014:20).

**Evaluation of GWN**

A recent external evaluation of GWN from 2012 to 2014 assessed the relevance, impact and efficiency of the interventions. The study included 646 beneficiaries across 80% of the involved communities, stratified across different types of stakeholders. Interviews, focus groups, and observations in local communities and at GWN’s cross-border
conferences and meetings provided the basis for the evaluation. Stakeholders reported their acquired “knowledge of shared water and environmental issues and interdependent nature,” the “necessity of working together in order to protect their shared water resources,” and the programmatic impact on their attitudes “towards their neighbors” across a political divide in a shared basin (Butterfly 2014:6-8).

To advance environmental peacemaking it is important to select individuals based on their willingness to engage, commit, and take the necessary political risk. Participants must be strong and ready to voice their opinions: they are visionaries, willing to see beyond the current situation and become pathfinders for peace. They are likely to be outliers, risk takers and outspoken individuals. As a result, participants interviewed for this evaluation were unlikely to hold back criticism if the GWN program activities did not meet their expectations. If, however, GWN successfully empowers them to create change in their communities, these committed activists are likely to applaud its success.

**Findings of the Evaluation**

*Delivery of win-win opportunities by aligning objectives*

Strong facilitation is needed to be able to connect communities and identify win-win objectives that can connect the communities. Participants in GWN activities are strongly motivated by their own personal interests. Thus, in order for cross-border activities across conflict zones to be successful, it is important to design the project’s agenda to find common ground and focus on win-win opportunities for not only the communities, but the individuals. Careful project design and effective facilitation of meetings help maintain the focus on a single common problem. It ensures an alignment between the participants’ objectives and local solutions across the conflict zone.

Official authorities, private institutions and NGO come to the conferences to reconnect with people, expand their network, exchange relevant program experience, increase their knowledge about environmental hazards and prevention, solve problems related to Priority Initiatives, and explore the opportunity for initiation of economic development in their communities (Butterfly 2014:13-14).

Youth participate to meet new friends, have fun, and learn about the environment. Several Water Trustees expressed appreciation for the opportunity to learn directly about the other’s culture and teach about their culture outside their normal channels (media, friends and family) (Butterfly 2014:14).

Many community members appreciated EcoPeace’s role in facilitating cross border meetings, saying that the meetings provide a “safe-place” for the local communities to discuss issues effecting cross-border and neighbor communities. Participants were free to talk about their realities while using constructive means to seek solutions. Meetings and conferences delivers a capacity to create and sustain strong networks of cross-
border communication with long-term impact beyond the concrete conference and/or cross-border initiative (Butterfly 2014:17).

Relevance for peacebuilding
There is a clear recognition of the value of the cross-border meetings: “95% of the participants confirmed that the Cross-Border meetings are strengthening the acquaintance, trust and cooperation between cross-border communities” (Butterfly 2014:12). In addition, the cross-border activities deliver a strong capacity to shape public opinions, motivate decision makers to create joint initiatives, and engage funders to finance these initiatives. The exclusive focus on water helps engage participants to seek common solutions while overcoming the typical political, cultural, and religious conflicts so common to the area.

A challenge of the community based model for change is to engage high-ranking officials without transferring the initiatives to their responsibility. In the unsteady political landscape, environmental issues are held hostage; used as pawns in the overarching political conflict resolution and the official peace process. In order for the initiatives to produce real change, a careful balance must be struck: to achieve the explicit approval of officials without losing momentum to the tedium of politics (Butterfly 2014:18).

Appropriateness of activities
Participants evaluated that the small scope of the workshops, timetables and agendas of the GWN project, paired with EcoPeace’s professional facilitation support offered all the necessary elements for community members to realize objectives. The program facilitates the development of relationships on a personal and professional level and the development of formal as well as informal dialog (Butterfly 2014:18).

For youth groups there is an appreciation for the educational value and joy offered by activities and field trips. Unstructured time allows for informal interaction and dialog, which participants stated as helping to increase mutual understanding across the nationalities. Water Trustees wish to sustain and deepen the personal and activist relationships; they want to develop the dialog of water realities further than the program’s 1-year engagement. As a result, EcoPeace has since expanded the program to allow extended involvement as Alumni Water Trustees. Finally, adults have also confirmed the program’s impact on youth; as it develops their commitment to the environment, their skills as leaders, agents of change, and capacity to develop larger activities requiring joint efforts (Butterfly 2014:18).

Environmental peacebuilding
The project improved 91% of the participants’ knowledge of shared water, environmental issues and their interdependence. With 95% expressing an understanding of the necessity to work across communities and borders, of these 78% believes in the necessity to protect shared waters (Butterfly 2014:21).
Among the participants, there is an overwhelming understanding of the necessity to work together. After participation, 95% demonstrated a more positive attitude towards their neighbors across the border in general and 94% between Israelis and Palestinians. A majority (91%) would even consider hosting the members from cross-border communities (Butterfly 2014:22).

A few participants expressed concern over the fact that Palestine is not an equal partner in the dialog, suggesting that “the relationships cannot get better unless Israel gives Palestinians their fair share of water” (Butterfly 2014:22). This attitude reflects an unfortunate direct effect of the political reality of the occupation and the socio psychological framework. It provides a continual challenge to the project and hinders a willingness in some people to engage in activities that could ultimately improve local environmental sustainability and community welfare.

**Practical Challenges when Operating in a Conflict Zone**
While the evaluation documents that GWN is successful operating in a difficult ecological and political situation, the tense political context endangers the program’s progress. Even with all the goodwill built and all the joint activities successfully implemented, tensions remain high in the Jordan Valley in light of the recent war in Gaza, the continued Israeli occupation, lack of free movement and suppressed development of Palestinian communities. Levels of patriotism and nationalism remain high. The risks associated with a participant being labeled a “normalizer” are not to be underestimated, even if the accusation is used without any regard for the program’s overall social and economic benefits to the community.

Considering these political and the social constraints, it is a very challenging environment to bring Jordanians, Palestinians and Israelis together for the activities carried out by GWN, requiring the commitment of strong, independent people with a genuine belief in the potential benefits for their local community.

**Conclusion: Replication Outside the Region**
The success of EcoPeace Middle East’s GWN program has generated increased interest in replicating the program in other transboundary basins. Civil society organizations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, and India-Pakistan are adapting the program for local implementations (EcoPeace 2015b).

EcoPeace Middle East invites practitioners of environmental peacemaking to replicate the GWN methodology by utilizing our educational resource guides and textbooks (EcoPeace 2015c). This toolkit provides a framework for creating a successful educational component, and should of course be adapted to reflect the specific local, political, and ecological context. The hope is given EcoPeace’s demonstrated success for reversing the negative spiral of conflict and environmental degradation in the Jordan Valley.
Valley, similarly designed interventions building upon common interest and dialogue can help improve the lives of riparian communities worldwide.

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