

**Integrating a Regional Perspective into
Socio –Environmental Education for Activism**

Friends of the Earth Middle East

www.foeme.org

A Cross Border Environmental Challenge

If each one of us lived alone, our interaction with the environment would be determined only by the availability of natural resources and our own needs. The complexity in resource management is rooted in the fact that natural resources are shared among a growing population, made up of a range of societies, cultures, and political entities that sometimes are in a state of conflict. Complexity and tension increase when the natural resources in question cross borders, such as water. Water is a resource that is necessary for the survival of all sides, and despite its sensitivity and great value, this resource is often neglected, polluted, and in shortage. The challenge in managing cross border water resources is rooted in the tension between viewing them as a source of conflict or as basis for cooperation and the promotion of good neighborly interactions.

Dealing with this challenge is at the foundation of the work of Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME). FoEME's activities are characterized by the mutual dependence of Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian neighbors on a shared resource; a dependence that requires cooperative management. In order to reverse the familiar situation in our region of a "zero sum game" between sides when it comes to everything related to protecting water sources and allocating the resource, FoEME works to instill a regional vision based on the principle of sustainability, meeting the interests of all sides while also considering the needs of nature. In line with the organizational approach, it is necessary to have an in depth understanding of the reality of water in order to avoid a narrow and limited perspective of the issue. Each country's own challenges and needs, as well as those of neighbors, provide a frame of reference for joint thinking around mutually desired solutions for all sides. Hence, environmental activism is inseparable from social activism as they are both based on mutual respect and understanding of the other, including the environment and the people who are part of it, through ongoing cross-community dialogue.

Expanding Youth's Circle of Associations

FoEME's work in local communities illustrates the connection between environment, society, and economy, as well as the need to act within a delicate interconnected framework. A regional perspective expands the holistic view of the boundaries of ecological systems. For youth who are in a critical stage of forming their identities and finding their place within various circles of associations, experiential learning of socio-environmental issues allows for the expansion of one's circle of association from their immediate surroundings to the regional drainage basin with all of its complexities. Deepening the

connection and exposure to the complex environmental reality in the drainage basin encourages inquiry, research, and critical thinking about what is typically taken for granted and perceived to be inevitable. An important component present throughout the educational journey is presenting the greatest challenges not as being potentially irreversible and discouraging, but as opportunities for improvement and change, openings for constructive dialogue and cooperation with the neighboring community on the other side of the border that is dealing with the same problem. While the process is not simple and is ridden with obstacles and both cultural and political barriers, increased knowledge and awareness are integrated into personal and practical experience, developing the need and ability for active involvement – activism.

How Do You Translate the World View Into Educational Work?

- 1. Teaching through a range of approaches** primarily interactive methods of personal experience, allow the youth to create the connections, be critical, develop creative thinking skills, and more. Examples include: structured discussion, simulations, role play, field research, model building, and hazard mapping.

Using the year-long "Good Water Neighbors" training program, topics are taught that are relevant and interesting to youth – ecology, water, and peace. Through the focus on water resources, youth are exposed to the range of connections between environmental issues: basic knowledge of topography, climate, geomorphology, and hydrology that provide the background for questions about water quality, health, development, urbanization, agriculture, waste, sewage treatment, and desalinization. **Throughout, the students aim to deal with questions** such as: fair water resource allocation, infrastructure, price setting, privatization of natural resources, ownership, conservation, and of course responsibility and decision making.

Our strong recommendation – get out of the classroom, engage students in topics that are of interest to them, allow them to express a true opinion and critique, and give them the tools for implementation.

- 2. Meetings with youth from different populations** enable them to meet peers their age who live right nearby – in Israel, Jordan, and Palestine. Meetings are based on a broad common denominator.

The personal interaction between youth with different lifestyles, living conditions, and attitudes, brings up the complexity and importance of the different components conveyed in the group activities. The intercultural dialogue demands a process of trust building, emphasizing the importance of preparation for meetings between students from different cultures (nations) who have gone through a similar learning process. Through joint work during the workshops, such as mud building, youth camps, and intercultural trips (multicultural), a process of joint learning and creativity takes place through **the asking of questions, the change of stereotypes, the search for common ground, and the emphasis on the geographical and environmental connection** between the youth. Dealing with the various challenges that arise in the intercultural meeting demands that lessons are learned and the educational process is improved.

3. Setting a personal example

The personal connection and cooperation between the Israeli– Jordanian– Palestinian staff serve as a model and example for the youth of how it is possible to jointly manage issues despite the existence of conflicts. Building cooperation within the staff requires continual training and periodic meetings.

- 4. Creating a space allowing for activism** – active implementation of the ideas include ecological building, leading a community based campaign, creating movies, generating maps, recording songs, leading young classes, active school breaks, virtual meetings through Facebook, writing blogs, and more.

In summary, the youth's experience contributes to their sense of belonging, to the building of mutual trust as well as self confidence in their ability to make a change: a change in perceptions and perspectives and, as a result, a shift in patterns of action and decision making. This awareness, along with the building of trust, allows for the existence of cross-border activism.