

## Community library as a pedal to community education and sustainable development

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### **Abstract:**

*Trust Programs offers various services to marginalized groups in Palestinian society, especially to villages located in the North West region of Jerusalem. These villages are situated behind the Annexation Wall which isolates them from the other urban areas, making it difficult to access transport or to attain social services with closures and check-points restricting movement. People in these villages also have no or limited access to schools and other educational institutions. Beginning with this scenario, Trust Programs continued for the second year working with village communities to establish a community school in cooperation with the Palestinian Ministry of Education (MOE). At a later stage the school established a community library in Al-Jeeb Village as a model, which was copied by other villages in the area. The paper will present the development of the community library of Al Jeeb, beginning with the Mother-to-Mother program which aims to raise awareness of mothers and families in the importance of education for their children and to prepare families for the entry of their children to schools. With the success of the first program a second one, Learn by play, was introduced through the community library. This program is based on the premise that every child has the right to learn, is considered a prerequisite for entry to other community based programs and as a lever for life-long learning. The program aims at limiting illiteracy and decreasing the dropout rate from schools and operates on three levels which involve parents, teachers and young women volunteers, with the child as the centre of the activity, thus creating relationships based on cooperation and understanding to work for the child's best interest.*

**Keywords:** Palestine, community libraries, Trust Programs.

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### **Introduction**

The *Trust of Programs for Early Childhood (Trust Programs)* was established in Jerusalem in 1984 and aims to raise awareness of, and empower the Palestinian community. The

programs are designed to work with families as a crucial unit in traditional communities. The families are represented by mothers, fathers and children. *Trust Programs* believes in the importance of bottom-up planning based on the needs of the local community, and works hard to support national benchmarks to fight illiteracy through education. Combating illiteracy within families helps encourage further education, knowledge and awareness.

Al-Jeeb population is approximately around three thousand eight hundred and five (50.5% are male) (PCBS, 2007). The illiteracy rate amongst the Al Jeeb population is approximately 7.1%, of whom 78.7% are females. Of the literate population, 14.8% have no formal education but can read and write; 30.4% have received elementary education; 30% preparatory education; 12.4% secondary education; and only 5.1% have completed higher education (PCBS, 2007).

### **The community library**

The community library is a centre where all services and activities are being made available to all family members and fast becoming part of everyday life. In addition, the community library has become a gathering point for all community members to meet, plan and organize activities. Additionally, the library has moved from depending on donors and external help, to become administered by the community it serves. For example, educated women in the village are volunteering in the library to help combat illiteracy. The library is assisting in improving several aspects of the society, as men are supporting women to go and learn. Furthermore, a local committee of parents, volunteers, teachers and the elderly has been established to monitor and follow up the library's activities. Currently this committee not only monitors the library, but they are an asset to the library by offering different services such as training courses and social activities for families to spend quality time together . In this way they are working build capacity through the library.

The community library is strongly connected to the people's cultural identity. It conducts a range of activities such as Palestinian traditional dance, acting/drama and workshops where parents develop educational games for their children. These services are in addition to more traditional activities such as borrowing books, story time and providing access to educational games for parents, children, and local citizens to sustain learning for all family members.

### **Mother-to-mother Program**

The first community program implemented by the library specifically targeted mothers as a group, because it was felt that mothers are a main pillar in any society and often welcome change which aims to develop their communities. The *Mother-to-mother* program enables mothers to become familiar with the essentials of early childhood development processes. After training, the mothers pass on their newly acquired knowledge to other women in their village with the guidance of *Trust Programs* staff. The program also empowers mothers within their social context and encourages them to commit themselves to community work.

The program is culturally oriented, as the materials provided are in Arabic and written according to the needs of the Palestinian community including children's nursery rhymes which are from Arabic culture. The program is modular in nature and the different dimensions include:

- paraprofessional training for mothers who become supervisors;
- home visiting where the supervisors visit their peers at their home;
- group supervision at the community library; and
- couples group supervision.

The program has proved to be a focus point for family intervention and women empowerment programs, as many family and women's programs have stemmed from the *Mother-to-mother* program.

### **Learn-by-play program**

In cooperation with *Trust Programs*, the community library also targets different groups in the community based on their needs. The first target group is usually students. Through the community library and with *Trust Programs* support, fifty female and male students between second and fifth grade who are identified as low achievers are targeted. The goal is to combat illiteracy which is often the result of automatic advancement through these grades, by empowering students with essential learning skills such as increasing their skills in Arabic languages (native language), then English and Mathematics. The program works by simplifying the curriculum and using proper handouts, so students are not marginalized and alienated from their peers and in their community. The program also works to modify behaviour using psycho-social learning and incorporates information such as health concerns, general safety, healthy food intake/nutrition and a healthier set of roles within family and society.



One of Learn-by-play program students reading a story in the community library



Students and the community library tutor, using one of Learn-by-play program tools

In addition, the program also targets young people, especially females, who have already dropped out of school and cannot re-enrol. The program is designed to encourage these youth, with a special focus on females, to get involved in the learning groups organized by the library to gain skills and tools which will help them in developing their personal lives. Many of these females have become tutors in their community library, which helps them to gain self-respect, and the respect of their communities. This program also helps to protect women from being marginalized in their societies.

The children in the Learn-by-play program generally come from families which have socio-economic problems and most of them suffer from family violence. The group consists of all the pupils in the learning groups, and focuses on giving the children sense of security through non-violent environment. The Learn by Play program offers pupils a pleasant environment where they can feel confident, safe, and free to express themselves through their friendly relationship with the tutors who are from the local community. Additionally, there are didactical games and work papers that help explain educational concepts in a non-traditional

teaching and learning environment which is based on learning through play and dialogue. This is done with the help of parents and the community, including the local committees.

The Learn-by-play program activities aim to help pupils in developing the following:

- the interactive learning process;
- the development of understanding rather than the memorization of information;
- the creation of continuous dialogue with pupils;
- coaching pupils to build their personalities; and
- the incorporation of the concepts of democracy especially in education, to spread the concepts wider into the community.

Students engage in activities twice a week which include small group work, drama/role play, storytelling, games, dancing and music, and work sheets. These activities are planned and carried out by volunteers and family members who started to participate in the activities to support their children. Once a month, a fun day is organized to provide children with a psych-social support, through organizing activities and games for children and their mothers.

### **Working with parents**

The second target group is parents who need to be more engaged with their children. The program is also about better communication and focuses on preventing violence against children, creating a safe educational and emotional environment, respect, and appreciation for the children's capabilities. Activities include literacy workshops for parents (both mothers and fathers). In these workshops mothers ages range between eighteen to fifty years old, while fathers ages usually ranges between twenty and fifty years old.

Women tend to have lower literacy levels than men, due to early marriage, because they work on farms or help their mothers at home. Although many of these men and women have received education until the tenth grade, they are still unable to read and write. As a result, these people are not included in the illiteracy statistics. Many adults also refused to attend the literacy workshops due to feeling ashamed and shy. After some home visits by *Trust Programs* staff and members from the community library committee, more parents were encouraged to attend these workshops.

Literacy workshops include the teaching of reading and writing, life facilitation, knowledge about the surrounding environment and other similar issues. Parents also produce stories, comic books and puppets for their children. An advanced literacy workshop on how to use computers to help them at their jobs and in teaching their children has also been offered. The community library has become a hub for parents to exchange information and experiences about raising children, and how to create a healthy environment within the family that encourages education and discourages dropping out of school. Moreover, parents are coached using a life-oriented approach to learn more about hygiene, how to cope with stress and the importance of nutritious food for their children.

### **Working with school teachers**

A third target group are school teachers. When working with this group a comprehensive and holistic approach is used where *Trust Programs* staff act as a support agents for students inside and outside the school. This intervention strategy uses collaborative meeting sessions, discussion groups, and workshops to develop new tools to deal with students. As a result of these initial meetings, a parent-teacher support committee has also been established.



Community teachers in one of the library workshops aimed to raise their skills

Who works with the students? Young women volunteers aged eighteen to twenty-five 18-25 years old, who have dropped out of school at fifteen years of age. These women are usually marginalized in their villages, and have few opportunities to develop skills. Through the community library these women work with students using the Learn-by-Play program implemented by *Trust Programs*, thus achieving skills and knowledge in a way that will raise their self-esteem, family status and which encourages social empowerment.

### **Conclusion**

The *Trust Programs* develop intervention programs using the fundamental philosophy that all learning activity undertaken throughout life aims to improve literacy, knowledge, skills and competence from a personal and social perspective. This belief is the main pillar in developing programs which will assist communities and individuals to continue development and act as local drivers to achieve sustainable development. Community programs which highlight literacy enables communities and individuals to adapt to the developing knowledge-based society and actively participate in all spheres of social and economic life, thus taking more control of the future.

The results of the Trust Programs clearly demonstrate that community libraries are a major tool in combating illiteracy in closed rural communities. Also, programs such as Mother-to-mother and Learn-by-play not only serve as a tool to combat illiteracy, but are also a way for marginalized women to receive training and become empowered to step up to take a more active role in their societies that is different from those traditionally determined for them. Furthermore, the new programs and activities that have developed from the services offered by the community library enrich the community's understanding of learning. This has encouraged those who have not been able to continue their education for political, social or financial reasons. Finally, such initiatives assist communities in their transition to a knowledge-based community which enables members to be active agents for change and ongoing development.

### **References**

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