



REGIONAL TRAINING AND INFORMATION SHARING ON URBAN AGRICULTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Proceedings of the Qualitative Valuation Session of the Training Course

Introduction

During the Exit Workshop of the “Regional Training and Knowledge Sharing on Urban Agriculture in the Middle East and North Africa” project which took place in Amman September 9-10 2007, a special session was organized to value the project achievements.

The session was attended by the initial teams who participated in the training course held in September 2005 and kept an active communication with AUB-ESDU: Amman, Baalbeck, Damascus, Jericho and Ariana. The Gaza team could not participate because of the blockade on the city, despite its complete willingness to attend.

It is to note that the Algerian team got entangled in internal conflicts and was not able to process the pilot funding that was awarded and stopped subsequent communication with ESDU, while the Zabid team did not show interest for follow-up upon its return and did not submit a pilot project proposal and were later replaced by another team from San'a.



The “old timers” of the course engaged into an active discussion

The valuation was done in brainstorming rounds over two probing questions: what went well during the course and how could you explain it, and what could have been improved and/or done better. Once all thoughts were collected and recorded, participants had the

chance to reflect on each one of them. Similar answers were clustered and pooled when producing this report.

What worked well in the course and why?

On the course design

- Despite the diversity of problems and contexts in the Arab World, the course managed to create a consensual common language which addressed our contextual specificity.
- We learned a lot from the case studies that were presented. Frankly speaking, we were very positively surprised by the participatory delivery of the information as we were expecting a rigid academic course and we found ourselves in the middle of a think tank

On the course content

- We knew broadly about Urban Agriculture, yet we were not aware of its importance as a livelihoods niche and its various dimensions (environmental, social, economic) which were explained very well during the course
- It provided us with workable alternatives to address urban poverty at the level of our city.
- The course had a solid scientific design, yet it could equally appeal to researchers, municipal officials and Civil Society representatives
- The course was “thought provoking”... It provided us with answers but also generated new questions and problematiques related to the issues discussed.
- The use of regional facilitators from different MENA countries to deliver the course modules is a definite plus and helped exposing us to different models and schools of thought.

On the overall process

- The rigorous selection process of the course participants contributed to the good dynamics and the positive spirit that reigned throughout the course. Participants had to “earn” their participation and hence dealt with the course contents and the course outcomes with great responsibility
- The course provided us a unique opportunity to meet and discover many realities on water, environment, poverty and others in MENA. The networking that was initiated during the course should continue and AUB-ESDU and well as the Arab Network of Cities on Urban Agriculture are invited to play a catalyst role in the networking process.
- Despite the tensions between Lebanon and Syria, and despite internal problems at the level of the Syrian Delegation, Damascus was not dropped off from the

process, which demonstrates the scientific neutrality and the conflict resolution skills of the ESDU Team.

- The use of Arabic language throughout the course is also a definite added value and contributed to the ownership of the whole process

On the course impact

- The course left an undeniable mark on me as a municipal officer. I look now at agriculture and urban poverty in my city from a totally new perspective.
- The course provided a good opportunity for professional growth for the participants by adding an additional expertise, especially that it ended by receiving a participation diploma from the American University of Beirut which is a “secret wish” to many participants from the Arab World
- We gradually built the support of the policy makers within our city, first by endorsing our participation, then by building momentum around the pilot projects and finally by the new opportunities that were identified during the last year of the project (RUAF work in Amman and San’a, the Focus Cities project in Ariana, the renewed interest in peri-urban agriculture in Damascus, EU funding for the UA Committee of Jericho, mainstreaming of Urban Agriculture in Gaza, ...)
- The 5 copies of the Arabic Translation of the book “interfaces urbaines” disappeared from the municipal library within less than 6 months, which means that the topic appealed to other interested persons within the municipality ☺ The Arabic edition of the UA magazine is also a good tool for spreading information and reaching policy makers. We ask ESDU to continue producing relevant UA material in Arabic that would enable us to lobby more with policy makers
- The course created a spirit of “positive competition” amongst the participants, who are now eager to initiate local initiatives and international partnerships at the level of their cities to sustain the momentum created by the course.

What could have been improved and/or done better?

- To us, this exit workshop creates a feeling of “weaning” as we were secretly hoping that the process will be further sustained and that ESDU will continue playing a Technical Assistance role. The process ends a time where the group is not yet mature enough to sustain the course outcomes

(Note: ESDU responded by highlighting the work that will be carried under RUAF CFF and FSTT, and pledged continuous support to the Arab Network of Cities on Urban Agriculture to the greatest degree possible)

- Upscaling of the pilot projects did not take place at a similar pace in all cities. This shows that there are different levels of capacity at the city levels and hence more effort could be invested in building further the city capacities

- Some participants raised the issue that the Arab Network was not yet able to spread its wings and fly. The Network provides a good platform to sustain the achievement of the course but needs to get proactive

(Note: ESDU highlighted the importance of networking because of NEED and not because of convenience. It strongly encouraged the participants to take the opportunity of their presence in Amman and use the second day of the exit workshop to hold a planning meeting for the Network and determine a clear plan of action based on which ESDU could identify possible means of further support)

- We spent 3 weeks for the course itself and we only have now two days for the exit workshop! Maybe it would have been wiser to shorten a bit the duration of the course and spend more time (around 5 days) for the Exit Workshop.
- We would have wished a stronger support and involvement from ESDU while carrying out the pilot projects, such as country visits and assistance in the identification of other sources of funding. The cities that were not selected for the RUAF program feel left-out.

(Note: ESDU responded that country visits were not foreseen in the initial design, though it agrees that such visits would have been highly relevant. Security conditions in Palestine, tensions between Lebanon and Syria and the July 2006 war on Lebanon complicated further the situation.

The RUAF program has limited resources and cannot work on more than two pilot cities. ESDU will try to look at some potential work with the other cities as “dissemination cities”. Collaboration would be easier if these cities (namely Baalbeck, Damascus, Gaza and Jericho) would initiate work at the local level and stay in close touch with ESDU)

- The participating cities did not put enough effort in bringing the agricultural extension services of their respective countries on board, which would have increased the ownership of the project. Jericho highlighted the fact that the Ministry of Agriculture of the Palestinian authority was present and very supportive
- All city teams expressed their will to be trained on how to submit a proposal on UA to donors

(Note: ESDU expressed its readiness to provide such a training free of charge as a contribution to the Arab Network if the Network manages to organize an activity on its own)

- Damascus expressed its bitterness for not having its project selected for pilot funding, though the proposal that was prepared was later upscaled and funded from the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation budget close to \$100,000)

- Participants deplored the absence of bi-lateral communication between the participating teams. The Arab Network would definitely provide such an opportunity
- The course did not touch on the negative aspects of UA



A group picture of all participants in the Exit Workshop