



HEALTH COMMUNICATION  
PARTNERSHIP

# PARTNERS<sup>in</sup> *Action*

*Case Study:*  
**The Near East  
Foundation**

BY MARGARET B. ELLIOTT\*

**T**he Near East Foundation (NEF) helps people in the Middle East and Africa to build the future they envision for themselves.

To more effectively realize its mission, this private, non-profit, philanthropic organization returned three decades ago to its roots in the Middle East to successfully re-establish a network of highly skilled, entrepreneurial development practitioners providing project management, professional development, and institutional capacity building services.

## Background

After it was established in 1915 to assist refugees displaced during World War I, NEF spent the next 15 years raising more than \$100 million for humanitarian work, feeding more than twelve million people, providing medical aid to six million, and caring for and educating over 135,000 orphans or children separated from their families.

In 1930, NEF moved beyond the short-term relief to long-term

development programs, beginning with a project to help resettle refugees in 48 rural villages. NEF provided these communities with access to resources and skills to permanently improve their lives. Work soon expanded eastward into Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. In 1946, Iran asked NEF to undertake a similar program of rural improvement in 350 villages while NEF continued to work in the Middle East. By 1964, its attention increasingly shifted to Africa.

By the end of the 1970s however, NEF decided to re-establish itself as the field-based organization it once was in the Middle East. It initially focused on providing direct financial assistance in the form of small projects and grants — first in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and the West Bank, and then Sudan. Shortly after the Camp David accords were signed in 1978, money and international development agencies began investing in Egypt. This highlighted the severe shortage of — and intense competition for — qualified local development staff. In addition, many voluntary and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

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found it difficult to absorb and effectively use new funds. NEF saw these problems as an opportunity to expand.

## The Development Practice Support Network

While NEF continued to make grants and support small projects in the Middle East throughout the 1980s, its primary focus became professional development. NEF formed strategic relationships with several organizations that shared its vision of producing a significant number of skilled development practitioners. The intent was to provide opportunities for training and education, and opportunities to apply what was learned in existing organizations. The mechanism for this process was the Development Practice Support Network (commonly referred to as "the network").

NEF and several like-minded international partners supplied funds for local training, practice-related publications, and scholarships for studies abroad. Donor partners included the Ford Foundation, the British Council, AMIDEAST, ICCO (the Dutch Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation), Bread for the World, and EZE (the German Protestant Central Office for Development Aid). Lasting ties were formed with organizations such as the Coady International Institute in Canada, the Institute of Development Studies, and the Cranfield Business School.

The network had two very active Egyptian partners – the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS) in Upper Egypt and the Integrated Social Services Center (ISSC) in Lower Egypt – that hosted

training activities, organized field visits, and shared new ideas. Both brought new members into the network.

Most network participants were young professionals employed by local or international NGOs. NEF and its partners worked to attract well-educated young people to work in development and provided support for those already employed in local or international NGOs. The participation of practitioners working outside capital cities, especially those working in remote areas, was encouraged.

More than 5,000 development practitioners engaged in network activities. In addition to local training and overseas studies, these included defining network training needs; participation in course design and teaching; participation in the review, selection, and translation into Arabic of teaching and learning materials; experience exchanges; and seminars on areas of development specialization. Donor partners also funded small pilot projects that enabled network participants to put into practice what they were learning.

The network eventually grew so large that it could no longer be managed outside an institutional context. NEF and its partners considered creating a new, locally led organization that would continue to support development practice while expanding upon ideas and concepts put forward by some of the network's more active members.

## Center for Development Services

In 1990, the Center for Development Services (CDS) was unveiled as an NEF

affiliate in Cairo by fifteen enthusiastic network veterans who left secure jobs for a less than certain future. The network's original donor partners provided start-up support but made clear that it was up to CDS to find other funding sources for the work it wanted to do.

In the beginning, CDS had a management team that worked without titles or hierarchy. This helped build ownership and a sense of responsibility for the organization, but as the agency grew larger, it proved not to be effective for doing business. CDS then adopted a more formal management structure but maintained its participatory, consultative style.

CDS initially continued the network's capacity building activities and provided training and limited fee-based technical assistance to local organizations. CDS staff realized that an emphasis on developing individual skills was not enough; they began to focus on capacity building at the institutional level.

Over the next several years, CDS created a wide range of Arabic-language courses and training materials that could be adapted and integrated into the human resource and institutional development plans of the organizations with which it worked. Training and technical assistance aimed at enhancing individual skills and institutional performance helped these organizations to better articulate their development goals and become more effective in achieving them. Particular attention was paid to capacity strengthening in management, financial, and service delivery systems.

CDS worked with influential thinkers and leading experts to adapt and produce



*CDS staff conduct a community needs assessment.*

Arabic learning resources covering a broad spectrum of development sectors, issues, and approaches. CDS was one of the first in the region to include training of trainers as a major part of its programs, and to introduce adult education and participatory approaches to training and learning.

In the mid-1990s, CDS began providing project management services. Its assessment and evaluation services also were in high demand. By 1998, CDS had sixty full-time employees and had become the largest single provider of Arabic-language development services for NGOs in the Middle East. Its careful attention to course content and participatory teaching methods was instrumental in raising training standards throughout the region.

### Community Empowerment and Sector Development

More recently, NEF, with CDS included, shifted its primary focus to community

empowerment and sector development, coordinating activities in a particular geographic area or development sector, facilitating participatory planning and action, building coalitions, and promoting the growth of networks and structures to maximize impact and sustainability. Greater emphasis is now placed on government as a partner and on enlisting the participation of the private sector.

CDS' focus on empowerment and participation has helped give local communities a stronger voice and has encouraged more effective community action. The following two experiences illustrate this concept.

**NURSING.** In October 2001, enrollment in the nursing schools of Aswan governorate in Upper Egypt was less than 30 percent of capacity while hospitals were operating with nurse staffing levels of 25-30 percent. In cooperation with the Sawiris Foundation for Social Development, CDS worked to enhance and upgrade nursing school

teaching skills, facilities, and administration. Concurrently, Aswan's enthusiastic governor was enlisted and community-based organizations and local media were mobilized to improve the public image of nursing and promote nursing as a respected and valued career. Enrollment in Aswan's six nursing schools tripled and 398 new nursing graduates found immediate employment in public health facilities. The project was awarded the 2004 International Prize for Pioneering Development Projects by the Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND). In 2005, citing the Aswan experience, the Arab African International Bank asked CDS to join it in a similar one-year project in Cairo.

**WEST BANK.** In 2003, NEF launched a project to encourage local voluntary action to improve environmental conditions in a cluster of villages north of Nablus. The project emphasizes community-based approaches to solid waste management. The project brings together local government authorities, community groups, businesses, and donors to put an end to illegal dumping and uncontrolled burning of unsorted (and sometimes hazardous) wastes. A landfill is being built and a system of garbage collection established. Training and technical assistance are being provided to strengthen communication and collaboration skills and to train collection workers in safe sorting and disposal techniques.

### Major Turning Points

#### SETTING THE DIRECTION.

A defining moment in the evolution of NEF was its decision to focus on capacity building at the individual and

institutional level. This set the direction for nearly two decades of work in the Middle East. The focus on capacity building produced hundreds of highly skilled development practitioners; many went on to lead or hold key positions in local and international development agencies. Institutional capacity building efforts helped thousands of NGOs to be more successful in achieving their objectives; many are now viewed as strong development partners by their communities, governments, and donors.

**BUILDING A REGIONAL NETWORK.** While the dynamic CDS was being set up in business, NEF was not sitting idle. In addition to providing CDS with financial and technical support, the Foundation was also establishing new country program offices in the Middle East, as well as a regional office in Cairo. The regional office was created to stimulate the growth of NEF programs in the Middle East. This was done primarily by building supportive

relationships between NEF country offices and CDS, coordinating activities that spanned more than one country or office, and introducing region-wide management and financial systems.

By the late 1990s, NEF's country offices were led and staffed by local professionals responsive to the changing needs and priorities of communities in their own countries. Frequent collaboration between NEF offices and CDS was creating a pool of collective information and expertise across a broad range of development interests and sectors. Experience and insights gained through one activity or project were incorporated into others and successful models were adapted and replicated in new settings. CDS provided significant technical support to strengthen existing NEF programs, but this was not a one-way street. When NEF Jordan began its work on credit, CDS was able to help, but Jordan eventually took the lead in supporting NEF's West Bank, Egypt, Sudan, and Lebanon credit programs.



*Enrollment in Aswan's six nursing schools tripled as a result of CDS' intervention.*



**INFLUENCE OF CDS.** NEF created CDS, but the process of building CDS created new ways of doing business, which then transformed the way NEF operates in the Middle East. Changes included a greater emphasis on entrepreneurship and on raising funds from local and regional sources, the use of participatory processes to define and solve problems, and a shift in focus to community and sector development.

**CONSOLIDATION.** All NEF Egypt-based activities are being integrated. While responsibility for NEF's Egypt program was transferred to CDS in 2001, as of mid-2005 NEF regional responsibilities for program development and oversight are now being integrated into an expanded CDS. This includes its financial and management systems and staff. This will allow CDS to provide additional technical and administrative support more directly to NEF offices and programs in the region. It will also reduce the cost of doing business and help the agency maintain a competitive advantage.

### Competitive Advantage

Perhaps the most important competitive advantage is the fact that NEF works with clients and partners whose interests and goals intersect and overlap with its own. These clients and partners benefit – directly and indirectly – from NEF's many decades of experience and from NEF activities that precede and outlast individual projects or contracts. Factors that help NEF compete successfully include:

- In-depth knowledge of how to work within local and regional bureaucratic and cultural contexts
- Staff of highly qualified and dedicated

development professionals who focus on client needs and results

- Reputation as a “can do” organization
- Flourishing networks of local, national, regional, and international partners
- Business-like approach, and close attention to budgets and costs
- Sound management practices, reliable administrative and financial systems.

### Challenges

**STAFF RETENTION.** An organization that sends highly skilled employees out to work closely with other organizations risks having some of them hired away. NEF works to build a sense of identification with and commitment to the organization by offering opportunities that are rare in the Middle East. NEF's projects are laboratories for learning and staff members are encouraged to accept as much responsibility as they want or can handle. Those who perform as “partners” rather than just “salaried employees” gain access to additional training and greater

participation in key decisions. Salary schedules and benefits are the same throughout the region regardless of nationality. Although some offers are too good to refuse, NEF veterans tend to maintain close ties with and remain loyal to the organization after they move on to “bigger and better” things. This further expands NEF's network of partners.

**REGIONAL IDENTITY.** The next challenge, as CDS begins to carry out functions previously performed by the regional office, is to ensure that NEF maintains its international identity. This will mean incorporating existing NEF staff from other countries and other nationalities into the emerging regional structure, posing a major challenge for the Foundation throughout the region. Ideas currently under discussion include finding better ways to facilitate NEF Jordan's continued support to credit, fish farming, and water programs in the region; incorporating and building on the solid waste disposal and environmental action of NEF in the West Bank; and integrating NEF Morocco's extensive experience in rural development.



*CDS helps make sure needed information is effectively delivered to the intended audience. This helps local community health workers better relate to their urban counterparts.*

## Lessons Learned

**ENTREPRENEURSHIP.** NEF looks for contracting opportunities with like-minded organizations that help it move forward in ways that complement its own mission. Being entrepreneurial means doing this in a creative, proactive fashion. For example, with a grant from the Lucile and David Packard Foundation, NEF constructed and staffed a fully equipped reproductive health clinic in an isolated settlement for displaced Sudanese 40 kilometers outside Khartoum. Supplemental funds from NEF, Human Concern International, and other donors allowed NEF to build on the original initiative. A community-managed credit fund is supporting small businesses and training and technical assistance are helping residents mobilize community resources.

**MARKET SIZE COUNTS.** CDS was able to accomplish a great deal in a short period. This was due in part to the large number of donors interested in developing programs and projects for Egypt's large population of 70 million. The concentration of financial resources in Cairo allowed CDS to focus on more issues, engage in a wider variety of activities, and work on larger projects than would have been possible in any other country in the region. It also provided CDS with many opportunities to develop materials, products, and services that could be sold in countries with smaller markets.

**FLEXIBILITY.** Country programs may grow or shrink in response to changing circumstances, but operating regionally allows NEF to adapt more easily to such variations. Staff already accustomed to working together can be shifted to help manage rapid growth in the case of a large project or new contract. Alternatively, assistance can be provided to develop new business in the affected country or elsewhere in the region.

**CONTINUITY.** Despite talk about being "learning" and "knowledge"



*CDS urban work connects it with non-traditional clients, such as this urban fruit vendor.*

organizations, many companies shed staff to cut costs and then rely on external consultants and a core staff of administrators. These companies lose much of their ability to preserve knowledge and information within the organization. NEF believes it is important to retain a permanent core staff of development professionals who constitute institutional memory and can carry forward past experiences and build on them.

**LOCAL LEADERSHIP.** As is the case with CDS, NEF country office directors and staff participate actively in defining NEF objectives in the region and strategies for achieving them. They take the lead in mobilizing resources, motivating regional and local partners and donors, and developing the systems required to support NEF activities in the field.

The Near East Foundation in New York appreciates the role these local leaders play in their country programs and NEF's expansion in the region and supplements their efforts with additional resources when required. Particular attention is given to developing and maintaining relationships with bi- and multilateral donors and to the presentation of NEF's program in the field to the public at large.

**PARTNERS AND DONORS.** NEF works to foster cooperation among its many partners – government agencies, NGOs, local communities, the private sector, research and educational institutions, and donors – and to establish long-term relationships with partners and donors with common goals and agendas. This allows NEF to quickly share information or expertise with partners that need them. It also allows NEF to complete or fill out projects with new funds for expansion, continuation, or complementary activities that can bring significant added value to individuals and communities.