

Environmental Protection

The Importance of Volunteerism for Palestinian Youth



By Uzma Ahmed

An environmental ethic must be cultivated and adopted, in which resources – clean air, land and water – are viewed as precious assets to be carefully protected, managed and allocated.”

Jad Isaac, *Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development in Palestine*

Economic growth and environmental sustainability go hand in hand. It is therefore imperative that Palestinian stakeholders at all levels come together to implement strategies and develop innovative techniques in order to grapple with the twin challenges of achieving short-term economic growth while protecting the environment. Environmental sustainability is key to the prosperity of communities and meeting the needs of a growing population. Preservation efforts should not be limited to the protection of beautiful landscapes and historical sites but must also address the preservation of centuries-old agricultural practices amid depleting resources. Area C is critical for a viable, contiguous future Palestinian state, one in which citizens can benefit from the natural resources. Yet here, Israel is depositing vast amounts of its collected garbage, as reported on numerous occasions in international media.* Although the occupation can make long-term interventions difficult (building permits are not granted in Area C, for example), there are things that can be done; small incremental steps can be taken that bring about change. If we fail to make strides towards environmental protection and sustainability now, future

Palestinian generations will suffer not only the ravages of climate change but also the environmental impact of the occupation.

However, there is still cause for hope, and this is where local organizations like Sharek Youth Forum are leading the way in encouraging people to be more aware of their surroundings and the impact of their actions on the environment. Sharek aims to engage and involve Palestinian youth in the benefits of volunteering as well as promote environmental sustainability and civic participation. The Youth Village is one such initiative: Established in 2011, it is located on unused land thirteen kilometers away from Ramallah in the village Kufr Na'meh (in areas B and C). Striving to be an example of environmental sustainability, it offers young people the opportunity to enjoy the beauty and tranquility of the natural environment and aims to help them understand the importance of conservation and environmental sustainability. Applying practical concepts of environmental protection, youth volunteers have over the past five years gradually built an educational ecological park, a camping area, cottages, sanitary facilities, and training grounds.



With the occupation casting a shadow over all aspects of life in Palestine, it may seem difficult for civil society and communities to focus on the environment. The struggle for freedom, self-determination, and human rights takes precedence, while waste collection and littering are low on people's agendas despite the increasing significance of climate change globally.

Focusing on environmental principles, the Youth Village provides a balance between recreation and education. All the facilities have been built using biodegradable materials, and volunteers are encouraged to use resources from the surrounding area to build things. There are areas for team-building and leadership activities, outdoor sports, bird watching, as well as walking/hiking nature trails, and picnic grounds.

Volunteers at the Youth Village.



Since its establishment the Youth Village has served as a center for environmental education and as a facility for advocacy workshops and other youth-focused activities in which the participants are trained to become future leaders and develop their political, economic, social, and cultural capacities so that they can be advocates for their own rights and the rights of other young people. For Palestinian youth, particularly girls who have never left their village, this outdoor activity space brings together members from all economic backgrounds, religions, and political affiliations, and exposes them to new ideas and spaces. It encourages them to learn from one another and to develop strong and positive connections between youth. Thus, the objectives of this initiative are multiple: protecting the environment, enhancing a sense of social inclusion, and most importantly, using our powerful human capital. With Youth Village, Sharek is proud to steer a project that helps develop the Palestinian youth connection with their rightful land, and that helps young people remain steadfast under occupation. We know that they are our future.

Volunteerism and community-led efforts not only support the achievement of environmentally sustainable outcomes but also promote long-term self-sufficiency and empower communities to be resilient at the grassroots level. Young people are the backbone of Palestinian society. Organizations should put in place integrated interventions that encourage and inspire youth to deal with complex challenges. Implemented correctly, volunteerism can be a potent mechanism for capacity building. Tapping into community resources, such initiatives enable participants to be effective partners in the process and to propose solutions that are consistent with their needs. The long-term sustainability of any program is dependent on the level to which it manages to change widespread behavioral norms and encourage civil society to become active participants. Programs should be designed with the aim of not only identifying and solving specific environmental and social challenges but also fostering a sense of pride and ownership within Palestinian communities.

Sharek has specifically targeted youth and placed them at the heart of all its programs while developing a number of innovative solutions to address problems that young people and marginalized groups are facing. By organizing and implementing youth-led community service projects and other community-based initiatives, resilient communities can be built that take ownership over their own futures. Engaging young people and recognizing their importance to the success of programs has a profound impact on their morale as they grow up into key stakeholders in their communities.

From policy makers to civil society, organizations must design environmentally sound programs that reflect pride in the environment and translate into the preservation of Palestinian culture and traditions. Through the information spread on social media, young people are now more than ever aware of the effects of climate change and its damage to the local and global environment. Given the right tools, youth



The Youth Village near Kufr Na'meh. Photo courtesy of Sharek Youth Forum.

are keen to preserve the environment, contribute to community development, and be drivers for sustainable change. Youth have the time, talent, and energy required, and they are willing to join hands to solve problems in their community. The responsibility lies with institutions to nurture and provide them with the support they need to become major engines of change. Sharek strongly believes in the potential of young people to help us all achieve an environmentally sustainable, resilient, and viable future State of Palestine, where all its citizens live with freedom and dignity in a healthy and health-enabling environment.

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