

# Designed with Children in Mind!

## Anera's Preschool Education Program



By Sulieman Mleahat

Anera was set up to help meet the humanitarian and development needs of the Palestinian people back in 1968, and this year marks our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Over the past five decades, our work has evolved to reflect and respond to the changing needs of people in Palestine and refugee communities in Lebanon. Anera's legacy is impressive and has included building hundreds of schools, clinics, and municipal facilities such as public libraries, markets, reservoirs, and agricultural roads. We have also provided tens of millions of dollars' worth of medical aid and have helped thousands of students complete their education and many women become financially independent.

In 2010, Anera kick-started its early childhood development program, and I joined at the outset. Having spent many years studying and working in the United Kingdom, I returned to Palestine to join Anera and help invest in the most important sector in education and development. Although our work focuses on the kindergarten years, ages four to six, our

program aims to help all children from birth to eight. This is called the early childhood period, the stage that is considered to be the most important period in the human lifespan. What happens in these early years pretty much determines the overall outcomes of a person's life – their health and overall status. This is when a person's brain develops most, and the need for optimum nutrition, health, protection, and stimulation is vital. Also, we now know that for every dollar that government invests in the kindergarten years, society reaps anything between \$8 and \$16 in return over the lifetime of an individual. These stark facts compelled Anera to consolidate its efforts and focus on investing in the early years.

Over the past eight years, Anera's education program has focused on early childhood education, helping to renovate over 180 kindergartens – approximately 10 percent of Palestinian kindergartens – and train more than 600 teachers. To date, our program has also helped 30,000 children and 20,000 mothers. Crucially, Anera took the lead in the development of the first Palestinian preschool curriculum – an impressive effort on the part of the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, Save the Children, and many other individuals and organizations that focus on childhood. This initiative was launched by Minister of Education and Higher Education Dr. Sabri Saidam in October 2017.

Despite all our efforts, Palestine's youngest group of children remain in great need since most are poorly nourished, poorly educated, and inadequately cared for. Over 50 percent of preschool-age children do not access kindergartens, and those who do often receive poor-quality education. By and large, most kindergartens are not fit for their purpose – often housed in rooms under mosques and in old houses. Most lack adequate toilet facilities, lighting, ventilation, and essential play equipment, toys, and learning materials. Although Anera continues to identify and upgrade preschools in marginalized areas, we have recently launched a campaign to build new schools since Palestine requires approximately 1,800 kindergartens and classrooms to simply meet current needs.



Bahjat Tarazi KG, Al-Majd Village, near the town of Dura, southwest of Hebron.

**In addition to engaging in curriculum development and teacher training, Anera is renovating and building kindergarten facilities in Palestine. Once completed, the kindergartens are handed over to the Ministry of Education to ensure sustainability.**

Our kindergarten-building program is a bold statement of intent to afford our youngest children the best start in life by offering the finest learning spaces and pedagogy. Our children deserve the best, and we work with talented local architects, designers, and trainers to create state-of-the-art learning and play spaces and facilities. Our schools are aesthetically sublime, and anywhere else in the world they would be award-winners. Using guidelines and standards developed by Anera for the sector, newly built kindergartens have ample space where children can choose to play freely with plenty of toys and quality

Children at Bahjat Tarazi KG, Al-Majd, Dura.



Work in progress at Tarazi Qibya KG, May 2018.



New Tarazi KG, Qibya, Ramallah.



Rendering of new Sukhtian KG, Nassarieh, Nablus.



Rendering of new Sukhtian KG, Bazaria, Nablus.

learning materials. Playgrounds are safe and stimulating environments, providing a variety of play equipment and sandboxes. Green spaces are created around the schools to give children the opportunity to plant and play all year round. Large windows are designed to let in light and provide adequate ventilation. Toilet and wash facilities are first-class as children need to learn good hygiene and healthy habits early on. The external facade of each kindergarten is designed to blend in with the surrounding environment yet stand out as a center of excellence – raising the bar for other donors and agencies as they conceptualize new schools. We also aim to make each kindergarten self-sufficient in energy by installing solar panels.

We aim to connect Palestinian families in the diaspora with their homeland by investing in Palestine's youngest children. To date, we have built four new kindergartens and are currently building another ten across Gaza and the West Bank. I am personally grateful to the Tarazi family who have built two kindergartens, one in Al-Majd Village in South Hebron and the other in Qibya Village, and to the Ghiath and Nadia Sukhtian Foundation, which has committed to establishing ten new kindergartens and a teacher-training center in Nablus this year. As I write this, more Palestinian families are coming on board to help us reach our target of 50 new kindergartens over the next five years.

*Sulieman Mleahat is Anera's education program director. At age 10 he won a scholarship to the United Kingdom where he went on to complete his studies and work in international health and education with nonprofits such as ActionAid, MAP (UK), World University Service, Save the Children, and The Children's Society.*



Interior rendering of new Sukhtian KG, Nassarieh, Nablus.

**This an invitation to all our friends and families in the diaspora to connect with us to help meet the needs of Palestine's youngest and build a better future.**

and blog to know more about Anera's several campaigns, including its 50-Year campaign:

<https://www.anera.org/five-for-fifty/>  
<http://anera.org/ecd>  
[anera.org/tapestry](http://anera.org/tapestry)  
[anera.org/50-photos-for-50-years](http://anera.org/50-photos-for-50-years)  
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