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Developing the olive oil industry to support the Palestinian Farmer

Report on First Season's Activities

A Project of the Near East Foundation
In Partnership with
Human Concern International (HCI)
World Assembly of Moslem Youth (WAMY)

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Introduction

On Monday 4th of July 2005, the Near East Foundation held a workshop about olive oil production in North West of Nablus region in Palestine. The workshop took place in the Village of Asira Al Shamaliya.

The purpose of the workshop was to explore the best way(s) for intervention in the process of olive oil *making*. The focus on the olive oil industry in Palestine stems from the fact that Palestine is rich with its olive groves and is famous for its olive oil production. The olive oil industry constitutes 15% of the income generated by the agricultural sector in Palestine.

Several organizations attended the workshop. The ministry of Agriculture, the ministry of Local Government, Palestine standards Institute, Pal Trade, the Palestinian Food Industries Association, various village council members, farmers and press owners were among the participants.

The workshop was helpful in the way that it introduced the multiple stages of the olive oil *making*. The farmers spoke about the care that has to be provided to the olive tree, the picking process, and the transport of olives to the press. The press owners explained the pressing process and the problems associated with pressing and dispensing the olive oil. A food industries expert provided valuable information on the subject and suggested the ideal room temperature of the press and the advantages of cold pressing of olives to achieve a certain quality and acidity level olive oil. A marketing expert presented the most effective ways of marketing the Palestinian olive oil and pointed the obstacles facing the exporting of Palestinian olive oil. The Ministry of Agriculture expressed its readiness to hold meetings with farmers to discuss the best ways for tending the olive tree, the ideal time for each region to pick the olives, how to produce organic olives, and other useful information.

Following the workshop, The Near East Foundation engaged in the process of designing a plan for intervention according to the information gathered from the various experts who attended the workshop. A technical committee made up of experts in the field was formed in the days following the workshop.

Technical Committee Members:

Mr. Fares al Jabi; Agricultural Engineer

Dr. Osama Odeh; VP Palestinian Olive Oil Council

Mr. Shaker Joudeh; Deputy Assistant Extension Services, Ministry of Agriculture

Mr. Abdallah Lahlouh; Director General of Extension & Rural Development
Ministry of Agriculture
Mr. Tarek Kotob; NEF Country Director
Mr. Ibrahim Husseini; NEF Business Development Specialist
Mr. Salah Abu Eisheh; Field Manager

The decision to hire Mr. Fares al Jabi and Dr. Osama Odeh came after a recommendation by the Ministry of Agriculture.

Mr. Fares Al Jabi is a well respected figure with extensive experience on the subject of olive agriculture in Palestine and has numerous publications on the subject which are currently under print to be distributed on participating farmers.

Recently elected as vice president of the Palestinian Olive Oil Council, Dr. Osama Odeh is an expert in the field of olive oil production and is an owner of olive oil press as well.

Several meetings took place here Ramallah and in Asira that helped to determine the shape of the project.

Project Aim

The project aims at developing the olive oil industry in the Asira cluster (14 Villages, north of Nablus city) to a level where the production is of export quality capable of effectively competing in Middle Eastern, European, and North American markets.

There are 3000 olive farms located in the 14 villages north of Nablus, known as the Asira cluster. The size of each olive farm ranges between 1-100 dunums. The local market is the largest with individual consumption averaging around 17 kilogram of olive oil per year.

The project committee concluded that there was a lot of room for improving the methods of managing the farms. In addition the need to improve the existing olive oil presses in the cluster that total seventeen.

The table on the following pages indicates the number and type of olive presses in the project area.

#	Location	# of olive oil mills	Type		Active olive oil mills
			Modern	Traditional	
1	Asira	4	3	1	4
2	Al Bathan	0	0	0	0
3	Taluzza	1	1	0	0
4	Bayt Imrin	1	0	1	1
5	Yasid	2	1	1	1 Modern
6	Bezarya	2	2	0	2
7	Burqa	3	2	1	3
8	Nisf Jbel	0	0	0	0
9	Ijnesinya	0	0	0	0
10	Sabastiya	2	1	1	2
11	Naqura	1	0	1	1
12	Deir Sharaf	1	1	0	Closed
13	Beit Iba	0	0	0	0
14	Zawata	0	0	0	0
	TOTAL	17	11	6	14

The technical committee agreed that the Project should involve a comprehensive program for tending to the olive trees in the region, providing specific guidelines for pruning, fertilizing, picking and transporting of olives, rehabilitation of presses and proper storage techniques of olive oil.

To that purpose, the Near East Foundation planned to intervene in every phase of the production of olive oil taking active steps to raise the standards currently in use. The aim of the project is to produce premium extra virgin olive oil.

As mentioned before NEF will intervene to raise standards in every phase, namely in the following areas:

- 1- Tending to the olive trees; choosing the proper fertilizer and the use of the adequate amount of fertilizer.
- 2- Best techniques to pick olives and the right time to pick harvest.
- 3- Best method to transport olives after picking from the field to the press.
- 4- Best method to press olives and storage in press.

For each area of intervention NEF has contracted an expert or technical advisor, for the purpose of monitoring and implementing agreed upon tasks necessary to the success of the project.

NEF will select 105 farmers from the fourteen villages to work with on this project. NEF through its contracted technical advisors and experts will provide technical help to olive farmers in several areas.

Tending to the trees; with the direct supervision of Mr. Fares al Jabi, the Ministry of Agriculture will provide extension services to the selected farmers.

Picking olives and right time to harvest; NEF has contracted Mr. Fares Al Jabi to provide expert opinion on the subject to the farmers. Mr. Al Jabi will determine best time to harvest the olives for each field based on regular field visits. Mr. Al Jabi will also demonstrate best ways to pick and best ways to transport olives from the field to the press.

Best method to transport the olives from the field to the press; in this regard NEF will make a 50% contribution towards the purchasing of plastic boxes for olives in order to transport the harvest from the field to the press. The use of plastic boxes will keep olives from going bad along the way. The remaining 50% contribution will be made by selected press owners who will in turn distribute plastic boxes to selected farmers.

Best techniques to press olives; in this regard Dr. Osama Odeh will inspect and select five from the seventeen presses found in the cluster. Dr. Odeh will base the selection of the five presses on the following criteria
Each Press owner must agree to the upgrading recommendations set by Dr. Odeh.

Each Press owner must follow the operating procedures of the pressing machine as set by Dr. Odeh. These procedures are set in order to produce premium or extra virgin olive oil.

Steps achieved thus far:

Since late August of this year NEF's team of experts have been working hard to implement the project's components. Mr. Fares Al Jabi the lead consultant organized a number of farmers field schools where he lectured on topics like pruning, preventing and fighting diseases, watering, and the right time for picking the olives.

Dr. Osama Odeh is supervising the upgrading process of the olive oil presses. Dr. Odeh is also providing technical instructions to press owners on best methods to produce premium and extra virgin olive oil.

The Ministry of Agriculture, through its Nablus field office has dispatched six agricultural engineers to work with Mr. Fares al Jabi on the farmer field schools component of the project.

It is worth mentioning that more than 275 farmers attended these field schools even though only 105 farmers are registered to take part in the project. This demonstrates the popularity of the project among the farmers, and more importantly the thirst for knowledge and the desire to raise the quantity and quality of their produce of olives and olive oil.

Progress was made on several fronts.

The farmers:

According to a recent survey done by the Ministry of Agriculture, the number of olive trees in the area is 65,784. The Near East Foundation hopes that in the next year the project will impact more farmers and in turn more trees.

With the help of the Ministry of Agriculture and Mr. Fares Al Jabi (NEF's contracted expert to train the farmers), 105 farmers were selected to participate in the project. The criteria used in selecting the farmers were as follows; commitment to the project guidelines and instructions, each farmer had to own at least five dunums of land planted with olive trees, and that he or she (the farmer) would be between the age of 30 and 50, and willing to follow the expert's instructions on tending to the tree, and to follow the harvesting date set by the Ministry of Agriculture

Below is a list indicating the villages and number of farmers who were selected to participate from each village

Village Name	Number of farmers
Burqa	40
Beit Imrin	25
Taluzza & Al Bathan	30
Asira Al Shamaliya	40
Deir Sharaf	45
Yasid	25
Al Naqura	20
Bazarya	20
Beit Iba	15
Zawata	15
Total farmers	275

In addition NEF covered 50%, around \$8400, of the cost of following tools:

Tool	Number of tools purchased
Scissor	127
Chainsaw	98
Special Cotton sheets	300
Ladder 3m	75
Ladder 2m	59
Plastic	290
Plastic boxes	2177

These tools are necessary for the olive tree farmers and the fact that NEF through WAMY and HCI has paid 50% of the cost motivated the farmers even more to work hard and cooperate with the consultants for the success of the project.

As mentioned earlier the farmers received training and were also lectured on several important topics like pruning, preventing and fighting diseases, watering, and the right time for picking the olives.

To complement the field schools, over a 1000 manuals were printed and distributed onto farmers. The manuals, written by Mr. Fares al Jabi, contain useful information on proper ways to tend to the trees.

The Near East Foundation strongly supports the continuation of the project for next year in order to achieve the stated goals. Furthermore the Near East Foundation recommends raising the number of farmers from 105 to 300 farmers for next year. The Near East Foundation also recommends choosing an additional area to implement the project.

The olive oil presses:

Dr. Osama Odeh a leading expert on olive oil production in Palestine is supervising the upgrading process of the olive oil presses and is also training press owners on best methods to produce premium and extra virgin olive oil. To that extent, press owners were given a set of operating procedures. If followed accurately, these operating procedures guarantee the production of extra virgin olive oil.

Storing conditions of the olive oil are no less important than the pressing procedures and this explains why olive oil is best stored in stainless steel containers. If stored in plastic containers the quality will deteriorate day by day.

Thus far stainless steel containers have been installed in four presses; two containers for each press. Each stainless steel container can hold up to 2700 liters of olive oil. The main advantage of a stainless steel container is that it guards the olive oil against high acidity and maintains the quality and taste for extended periods of time.

The following is a list of the participating presses:

- 1- Al Taher Press- Asira al Shamaliya
- 2- Qusai Press- Asira al Shamaliya
- 3- Cooperative Press- Deir Sharaf
- 4- Cooperative Press- Yasid
- 5- Nitham Press- Sabastiya

The Near East Foundation covered \$1600 of the cost of the two containers; a 50% contribution.

The farmers sell olive oil with low acidity and peroxide levels at a higher price and that's one of the main goals of the project. Therefore stainless steel containers are important in achieving the project's objective.

Press owners, each received an acidity test kit, a \$250 value covered in full by the Near East Foundation. Dr. Osama Odeh provided training to each of the press owners on how to use the test kit. The kit helps press owners check the quality of the olive oil. Determining the olive oil quality serves as a price indicator that is fair and acceptable to all parties involved; the olive tree farmer, the press owner, the trader, and finally the consumer.

Equipment	Number	Cost	NEF contribution
Stainless steel container	8	\$25,600	\$12,800
Test kits for acidity	5	\$1250	\$1,250

Dr. Osama noted in his report that the press owners have followed all the operating guidelines; mostly changing the press water regularly, maintaining a temperature of 27 degrees Celsius or below, and storing oil in stainless steel containers.

Training of trainers:

Mr. Fares al Jabi lectured to 25 agriculture engineers working for the Ministry of Agriculture in the NW of Nablus area. Currently six agricultural engineers from the Ministry of Agriculture are working with Mr. Al Jabi on the project.

Recommendations for the next season:

In a recent evaluation meeting, Mr. Fares Al Jabi made a series of recommendations:

- 1- To continue with the farmer field schools and with the extension services in preparation for the upcoming season.
- 2- To postpone the picking or harvesting of the coming season (late October 2006) based on observations he made in the previous season (October 2005). The new picking season will likely be late October through early November 2006.
- 3- Another recommendation made was to allow farmers the opportunity to benefit from the same scheme that was offered to the press owners with regard to the stainless steel containers. This recommendation came because some farmers harvest large quantities of olives and in turn produce large quantities of olive oil. This olive oil must be stored till it is sold; therefore it is best if the farmers have

their own stainless steel containers rather than to depend on the press owners to store the olive oil.

4- With regard to the plastic boxes Mr. Al Jabi observed that the farmers should be given the opportunity to buy more plastic boxes to transport the olives with to the press. Dr. Osama supported Mr. Al Jabi on this recommendation as well.

It is worth mentioning that the current activities associated with the project proved very popular among the farmers of the project area. As mentioned before many farmers approached the NEF field office in Asira Al Shamaliya and asked to be involved in the project in order to benefit from it. However due to budget limitations the NEF was not able to accommodate them.

It is therefore of paramount importance to extend the project to cover the next season which is projected to be a better season. Furthermore the number of farmers should be raised to at least 300 farmers, where currently the number of farmers is only 105 farmers.

As mentioned earlier in the report, the number of olive trees in the project area is well over 65,000 olive trees. The Near East Foundation strongly believes in extending the project for the next season in order to impact as many farmers as possible. Dr. Osama Odeh mentioned in his last report that on his most recent visit to the presses he saw that farmers were still utilizing plastic bags to carry the olives from the field to the press, where ideally the olives should be transported in open rectangular well ventilated plastic boxes. The use of plastic bags instead of plastic boxes severely compromises the quality of the olive oil, as the plastic bag provides no protection to the olive fruit from getting scratched or squeezed together. The Near East Foundation hopes that by next season the majority of farmers in the area are using plastic boxes, have the right farming tools, and last but not least the right fertilizer(s). Mr. Fares al Jabi had indicated that the farmers are keen on raising the size of their produce but are unsure which fertilizer to use. The project management and the farmers alike expressed their desire to use natural fertilizers rather than chemical fertilizers for the next season.

Extending the project to cover the next season is absolutely critical to the farmers, press owners, and the community as a whole. Not only the project supports the Palestinian olive oil industry but also strengthens the bond between the farmer and his / her land. The farmer community in Palestine, as a result of this project and other similar ones, has an incentive to work harder since the return is almost for certain will be higher.

It is worth mentioning that next season's projections for the olive production are high and therefore olive oil will be abundant. The result a lower price, however if farmers were able to get *extra virgin* olive oil from their produce of olives, then they can get a better price. It is therefore very important to impact more farmers for next season.

Higher returns to the farmers are central to the project, and helping the farmers to achieve higher returns will have its benefits on the local community which the farmer is part of. The Near East Foundation takes pride in implementing such projects and values the trust of the donors and puts a high value on the relationship with community of the project area. A relationship as such, can only evolve from working closely with the community, listening to their concerns, and ultimately addressing those concerns in a manner that is effective and sustainable.