

The Gift of Hospitality

A Bethlehem-based project for cultural tourism

AEI's "The Gift of Hospitality" aims to establish a network of Bethlehem-based businesses led by Palestinian women who wish to present Palestine's home-based heritage of hospitality to international visitors. The project provides these women with a one-year intensive vocational training course in modern administrative and PR skills.

In the academic year 2017-8, the training involves 16 young women, 18-30 years, divided over 2 classes. In this first year of the training, almost all come from villages and refugee camps around Bethlehem: Walajeh, Artas, and Aida and Dheisheh camps.

The project recruits practically oriented Christian and Moslem Palestinians who want to set up a home-based business or do office work in the tourism sector. Several with an entrepreneurial mind set will be invited to participate in a cooperative network of tourism-oriented businesses in the broader Bethlehem area.

In selecting the first year candidates, we pay extra attention to those who have special cultural resources and talents to offer but face also difficult circumstances, such as when the Separation Wall severely affects their life situation.



To facilitate and strengthen the network of businesses in cultural tourism, a cooperative will be established for the development of joint publicity and marketing, the serving of Palestinian foods and drinks to visiting groups, and other income-generating activities. The cooperative will aim at the 'new' tourist or pilgrim interested in Palestinian and Christian (or Christian-Moslem) social life in the area.

Objective training

- The raising of vocational skills in cultural tourism among marginalized communities in the West Bank.
- The establishment of a Palestinian income-generating program in home-based cultural tourism aimed at visitors and pilgrims interested in meeting common people in the Bethlehem area and experience their social life and culture.

Needs and background

1. There is considerable unemployment in Palestine, also in the Bethlehem area, due to the almost 50 year-old occupation, problems of travelling, ups and downs in the tourism industry, and uncertainty about the economic and political future of the area in general. Unemployment figures for the West Bank and Gaza are sometimes estimated to be as high as 30-40%. Certain groups are especially vulnerable in the job market, such as women and youth without work experience. The present project focuses on these vulnerable groups.
2. While there is a range of academic tourism courses in the Bethlehem area, there are few vocational training opportunities in the administrative and communication-oriented professions. This reflects the general bias in Palestinian higher education towards the more prestigious academic field. There are few options for those who do not wish to follow or do not have the qualifications for an academic education. There is presently in the Bethlehem area for instance no vocational training in the field of modern administrative and secretarial skills. The vocational training offered will meet this need.
3. Most training and education in Palestine does not take into account the practical skills needed in the workplace. It is a common complaint among graduates that most studies are too theoretical to fit the demands of the workplace. The knowledge transmitted in existing vocational and academic education alike is almost always offered in standardized ways.
4. A feasibility study of AEI supported by the Anna Lindh Foundation (EU) three years ago showed that there is a need among tourists in the Bethlehem area and Palestine for more varied programs “off the beaten track” and for tourism activities aimed at meeting people and experiencing life and culture. At the same time, there is a need in Palestinian tourism, as stressed by the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism, to have more tourism programs outside the seasonal bottlenecks and also in other places than crowded tourist landmarks such as the Church of Nativity.

The feasibility study proposed to encourage the following tourism-related services:

- small-scale hospitality services (B&B, cafeteria, small shops)
- the communication of personal, family and community stories to visitors when hosting or accompanying them
- practical support in arranging day-trips in the West Bank including hikes
- the organization of small-scale tourism events or activities such as home-based embroidery, mosaic, cooking, singing and mural or stone painting workshops
- the sale of creative, non-standard souvenirs, as the large souvenir shops usually offer much of the same.

The present project focuses on these small-scale tourism services, with an emphasis upon the Palestinian home and family as the center of Palestinian culture.

Vision

The vision of the project is reflected in the project title, “The Gift of Hospitality.” Hospitality is basically an attitude - a talent, a gift - of sharing with others home, life, personal space and resources. Hospitality requires full attention to the guest and to the building of community.

This understanding of the gift concept inspires the project. The gift of hospitality is a message to believe in and communicate the peace of Bethlehem, a peace of openness and sharing, and sometimes of a cry for help. The message of peace says that the Bethlehemites, despite the difficulties they face, are still able to live and have joy, and show their inclusive hospitality.

AEI will use the ‘gift’ concept as a source of inspiration for personal stories to be developed and communicated out of the homes and businesses. The personal stories, to be put on social media, will creatively express the ‘gifts’ and feelings of hope in life of the project trainees and graduates. The ‘gift’ approach will be further present in other aspects of the program, especially the sharing of foods and drinks and the making of ‘gift’ souvenir articles.



‘Giving’ and ‘sharing’ are central educational concepts in other AEI programs that promote ‘living together’ in Palestine, including the project ‘Citizenship and diversity: Christian-Moslem living together’ applied at 30 schools in the West Bank. In this project, living together is shown to be based on the sharing of space, history, and stories. AEI also considers hospitality an important element of the Palestinian people’s *sumud*, or steadfastness/resilience.

Courses

Subjects

1. Basic administrative **skills**: emailing, Word and Excel, handling phone conversations, filing, elementary financial administration, note-taking.
2. Effective use of **Internet** and **social media**: making and uploading suitable texts, films and photos, brief blogs, use of Facebook and Twitter, website updating, presenting oneself and one's business/office to international audiences.
3. Organizing and accompanying **day programs** for visitors: suggesting visitors about practical and interesting trips, accompanying walks in neighborhood, supporting hikes, knowledge of public transport, providing basic information about Palestinian culture, organizing small events (practical and handicraft workshops, picnics, exhibits of old or newly made objects).
4. **Oral communication** with visitors, including tourism English, how to conduct exchanges with foreign visitors, and the effective presentation of personal, family and community stories.



Notice that the first two subject fields relate to the core tasks of a modern administrative and PR professional, wherever s/he works. The last two are related to requirements in the hospitality industry in a tourism-oriented city like Bethlehem. All subjects are practically oriented and have an important element of public relations/communications skills.

In development: cooperative

The small businesses will be supported by a cooperative which will

- arrange Palestinian (Arab)-type drinks and meals
- raise publicity to the network of businesses and their services
- organize programs for incoming individuals and groups, small or larger
- protect quality of services
- arrange traveling for visitors, including accompanying visitors
- develop small events for visitors
- explore the development and selling of souvenir articles expressing the 'gift' spirit of the cooperative.

The cooperative will be run by AEI. All profits will be reused to cover costs of the training, improve this training and expand the income-generating activities.

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