

Program description and evaluation:

Overall reflections:

What took place during the course of the work of AEF and the evaluation process went to show that there is no short cut to growth; people have to go through the pains of growth in their struggle to live and make sense of their life. In our case, several people with different outlooks and often with contradictory opinions and perceptions struggled to make sense of AEF. What took place confirmed a number of things:

- Being honest in saying our minds and being sincere in our commitment eventually transforms the differences in opinions and perceptions into healthy growth and towards developing a clearer vision of ourselves and of what we are trying to do.
- Usually, a conflict or sharp differences end up in breaking up/splitting groups. The AEF took the other path, that of continuous dialogue and openness to differences in opinions and perceptions, and a new phase was born. During the two days following the fifth meeting we moved into a new "orbit" of thinking, perceiving, relating and doing.
- What happened does not mean that all the differences in our perceptions and in the way we see things have disappeared. The combination of "convergence of hearts" and "divergence of minds" is the secret ingredient in healthy growth of groups. This is manifested so well in our case.
- In the very first letter sent out in August 1999 to the participants in the first AEF meeting, one aspect that was stressed as a main purpose of AEF is the construction of authentic thought and knowledge that stem from experiences in the Arab world and from discussions among Arabs and with people and ideas around the world. The last session in the agenda for the fifth meeting had the title "How to transform our work into thought: the challenge of the next phase of AEF's work." Although we did not have the time to do that in the general meeting, we did that in the CC meeting. Defining terms (such as "initiative") and relating them to a wider concern (change) form a starting point in constructing thought that spring from our own experience during the past 4 years of working with initiatives through AEF.

What is AEF in people's perceptions?

One of the issues that arise in relation to the Arab Education Forum is how people perceive this project that does not fall within a specific pre-determined format or definition. During the discussions a variety of visions were presented reflecting people's perceptions of what constitutes the essence of AEF. Altogether, these articulations were felt to accurately reflect, one way or another, what AEF is about.

One main conviction, which arose during the course of the evaluation, was that AEF has been crucial in promoting a 'culture of initiative' in the Arab world as a potential force for change that is in the hands of individuals and grass roots institutions. This was not part of the stated mission of AEF, but in the implicit understanding of what the overall philosophy of the Forum is. The discussions during the evaluation isolated this as a very important contribution on the part of AEF over the course of the past four years.

A second conviction was that AEF has played, and will hopefully continue to play, a vital role in fostering real partnerships amongst various NGOs in the same country or across Arab countries. Its stress on the "value" of each experience provided a common ground for the healthy interaction amongst various initiatives and/or individuals.

A third conviction was that AEF meetings have helped many initiatives to come out of their "isolation" as they fostered the feeling that there are people in other parts of the Arab world who are dealing with similar issues, facing the same obstacles, and having the same commitment to their work and mission.

One negative aspect has been an over-emphasis on the critique of the official educational establishment that has given the wrong impression that one of AEF's missions is to criticize and speak against formal educational institutions. It was clarified in the course of the evaluation that even though this might be occasionally expressed as the personal opinion of the director of AEF, it does not constitute the mission or purpose of AEF.

As to how people would describe AEF, the following descriptions/conceptions were stated:

- AEF is a space for learning and reflection, as it is also an instrument of change and growth.
- AEF is a space where initiatives are presented and discussed.
- AEF is a window to the Arab world at large
- AEF is a reflection of diversity in its work and its convictions.
- The strength of AEF is in that it builds on what exists.
- Focus on learning and not education is the heart of AEF

The Annual meetings:

Description:

AEF has, since 1999, organized 5 annual meetings. The first meeting was held in Beit Miry – Lebanon in 1999, the second in Amman-Jordan in 2000, the third in Sharm Sheikh – Egypt in 2001, the fourth in Agadir-Morocco in 2002 and the fifth in Beit Mery – Lebanon in 2003. Each meeting had a specific theme – focus as follows:

First meeting: Learning and Education

Second meeting: Importance of expression in learning

Third meeting: Characters targeting children and youth in Arab media

Fourth meeting: Inspiring initiatives in teaching the Arabic language

Fifth meeting: Reflection on and evaluation of the work of AEF.

Each meeting included 16 – 22 participants from at least 8 Arab countries with relevant initiatives in the field under discussion. Each participant had the opportunity to present his/her initiative and adequate discussion time was granted. The proceedings of each meeting were published in a book as well as on the website. Each presentation is linked to the email address of the person/organization for feedback. Furthermore, many of the meeting participants went on to organize bi-lateral and multi-lateral projects which sometimes involved the AEF as a partner as well.

Evaluation:

- During the course of the evaluation it became evident that there is disagreement on what we mean when we say that the annual meetings bring together "inspiring initiatives that focus on learning" from the Arab world. The discussion focused on two vital aspects of this issue:
 1. What constitutes an "initiative"?
 2. If we agree on the elements that make up an initiative, is it possible to agree on whether a certain initiative is "inspiring" or not? What if an initiative seems mundane and average in one context and inspiring in another, which context do we judge it by?

- There is a need for the annual meetings to go beyond their current task of being a space for the presentation of initiatives and contribute to influencing policies.
- The AEF needs to provide the opportunity for the in-depth discussion of and reflection on specific initiatives in order to help them look closely into their successes and failures and expand both horizontally and vertically in the exploration of that initiative/theme in order to help those in charge to move forward with their work.
- AEF needs to play a more active role in the dissemination of these initiatives whether through inviting people to make presentations, writing in the media, or through the website.

Qalb el Umur:

Description:

Qalb el Umur as a concept preceded the establishment of the Arab Education Forum by two years in the form of informal meetings amongst young Arabs who were interested in the reflection on and expression of personal experiences as a basis for learning and for the construction of knowledge about life and society. When AEF was established, Qalb el Umur became the sub-project which works with youth and expression.

Since 1999, 3 annual QU meetings have been organized (2000,2001, 2002), all of them in Jordan. These meetings brought together a number of youth from more than 10 Arab countries who have been actively involved in the production of Qalb el Umur magazines or films.

Since the first issue of QU magazine published in September 2000 in Lebanon, 16 issues have been published in Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco, Boston, and Kuwait, as well as one issue in Iran and ten issues in India.

Evaluation:

Qalb el Umur is in principle an initiative; however the presentations given by the youth who were involved in the project showed that this is not enough. The main problem has been that after the production of the first issue and perhaps the second there is a sense of boredom with the whole process and the youth feel that they need more than this and hence disassemble as a group and stop producing any more magazines. This, however, has not stopped many of them from taking their experience elsewhere and promoting the idea, sometimes even producing another issue with a different group. Others have been prompted to do their own grassroots initiatives to feel that they are actively contributing to the development of their community and not just writing about their feelings or experiences.

The evaluation discussion revealed a misconception which was not clarified in the initial literature on the project, which is that QU is not simply a product (a magazine or video) but rather a set of convictions and a process through which the participants become aware – through first hand experience - of the importance of reflecting on, sharing, and writing about their experiences. However, each issue of the Qalb el Umur magazine needs to be an independent initiative, i.e. each magazine needs to have a new spirit. The first issue is normally a new initiative for the group, and therefore exciting. If the second issue is produced in the same way it loses its vitality as an initiative, which leads to a feeling of boredom. Therefore, it is essential that each issue of the magazine should arise from a new sentiment or dream or vital issue for the group in order for the group to deal with it as a new initiative that encourages them to reconsider and reflect on what is happening around them and within them.

The discussion revealed that the main drive had been towards producing the magazines as a “product” without a drive for going through real experiences. This has eventually deprived QU of its rich content and brought about dissatisfaction amongst the participants.

Another image that was proposed of QU was that it is more of an informal workshop whereby youth come together to write about and discuss their experiences and then publish their writings in a magazine or produce a video about it. This is not an activity that needs to be repeated, in the sense that it can be repeated if the group feels they did not have the opportunity to express their experiences in full in the first edition. However, it is the experience that they go through here which is important, what is more important afterwards is that they go on to start with other inspiring initiatives and gain the habit of reflecting on what they do, writing about it, and sharing their reflections with other people of similar interests. This is the main purpose of QU which has been achieved in various degrees as expressed by many who have been through this experience; however that can easily be lost in the drive for producing a magazine as such.

It was agreed during the course of the evaluation that each QU group needs to disassemble as a group after producing the magazine, but it is their responsibility, either as individuals or as a group, to generate another QU group: i.e. transfer the experience to other youth.

It was also suggested that two new principles should be added to the QU principles: (1) Ensure the protection of the individual and society (not to hurt anyone), and (2) it is the responsibility of the group to give birth to at least one more group.

Another suggestion by the youth was that AEF needs to promote more dialogue between the local young QU groups and the adult network of AEF. The example of the local meeting in Amman was a very good one in the richness of this exchange and the potential for cooperation amongst them in the future, encouraging the involvement of youth in these initiatives.

The Resource Center:

Description:

The resource centre is at the heart of the products of the work of AEF since it attempts to document and disseminate information about all the inspiring initiatives that AEF comes across on a regular basis.

So far there are 12 initiatives out of a total of 35 presented in full in the resource centre on the web. The main difficulty has been that many of the initiatives have not cooperated in providing the necessary information or updating the available information that we have about them. The section on publications is currently under development since one of the objectives of the resource centre is the promotion of the publications that the initiatives affiliated with AEF produce.

Evaluation:

Since the employment of a Webmaster specifically dedicated to the development of the website and the resource centre in January 2003 the work on both aspects has been very efficient. However, it was agreed that the AEF staff and coordinating committee need to exert more efforts towards encouraging the individuals and organizations linked to AEF to present their work on the resource centre.

Regional Cooperation:

Description:

In the course of its work, AEF has been involved in specific projects of regional cooperation with organizations and/or individuals who are involved in the AEF network. Some of these projects were:

1. Workshop on "Regaining the Use of Senses in Education" organized by the Teacher's Creativity Center (Palestine) in Jordan in January 2001.
2. Consultancy and workshops in cooperation with the Reading Promotion Campaign in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

3. Training for youth on video documentation by Dimitri Khodr (Beirut DC – Lebanon) and Samar Dudin (Jordan) in November 2001.
4. Workshop on “drama in education” organized by Wassim Kurdi in Amman-Jordan in April 2002 in cooperation with El Warsha and El Fawanis theatre groups (Egypt and Jordan respectively).
5. Seminar in Alexandria on “Creativity and civil society” organized by the Egyptian Center for Mediterranean research and studies on development in May 2002.
6. Meeting for the network of initiatives promoting reading and writing in the Arab world in cooperation with the UNESCO office – Jordan in Amman – Jordan in September 2002.
7. Seminar on “illustrations in children’s books” at the Sfax children’s book fair – Tunis.

The involvement of AEF in these activities ranged from locating and bringing in facilitators for workshops to assisting in the planning, evaluation, and documentation, or providing financial assistance for travel and accommodation of participants.

Evaluation:

The individuals/organizations involved in these activities of regional cooperation expressed their satisfaction with the involvement of AEF so far and discussions are already in place for taking this cooperation forward.

One suggestion was made that it would be very important that more is written on these activities by the individuals/organizations with whom the AEF cooperates.

Another comment was made regarding the lack of involvement of the respective organizations that the Coordinating Committee members are linked to in such regional co-operations that the AEF undertakes. It was agreed that their future involvement will be a great asset to the coherent development of the work and vision of AEF.

AEF and QU Films:

Description:

Thanks to the Omar Khudari Foundation, AEF has been able to partially and/or fully support the production of a number of films by young filmmakers within three main guidelines:

1. Support young professional filmmakers as they are beginning their career in producing films about their lives or about the lives of people/communities close to them in the spirit of AEF and Qalb el Umur. The AEF contributed to the production of three such films in this category:
 - This is not living***, Alia Arasoghli (dir.), Palestine 2002
 - So near yet so far***, Eliane Raheb (dir.), Lebanon 2002
 - News Time***, Azza el Hasan (dir.), Palestine 2002
2. Commission the production of films about inspiring initiatives in the Arab world, whether as individuals or organizations. Three films have been completed so far and three are still in process.
 - Every day***, children of the garbage collectors in Cairo, CID (beneficiary), SEMAT (executive production), 2002.
 - Hajar***, Azza al Hasan (dir.), Palestine 2003.
 - Safar***, Dimitri Khodr (dir.), film about the AEF also featuring some of the inspiring initiatives that constitute part of the AEF network, 2003.
 - Dhahran Ahliyyeh schools***, Saudi Arabia, Dimitri Khodr (director) – in process.
 - Ahliyyeh girls school***, Jordan, Khaled Hadad (director) – in process.
 - Zeid al Mushiki school***, Yemen, Badr bin Hirsi (director) – in process.

3. Films done by children and youth presenting their lives. Three such films were produced as part of a pilot project in Palestine.

Our village, Kufr Neemeh village in Palestine, 6 young girls, 2001.

A day in our life, Amari refugee camp in Palestine, 8 young girls and boys, 2001.

Wa Baad, 3 young filmmakers in Palestine, 2001.

Evaluation:

Even though the films are of excellent quality particularly in their content and vision, and have been screened in local and International venues where some of them received well acclaimed awards, the efforts to disseminate these films to a wide variety of audiences have not been exerted to their full potential.

It was also agreed that the AEF needs to place greater focus on films documenting inspiring initiatives, as well as films made by young people as part of the Qalb el Umur initiative and vision.

Concluding Remarks:

The participants in the evaluation, during the course of the discussions and writings, made a set of general and specific suggestions for the future work of the Arab Education Forum. Following is a summary of these recommendations:

1. Disseminate research on Arab children and their needs
2. Disseminate research on teachers' needs
3. Discover new initiatives as they are budding and support and encourage them
4. Develop more films on initiatives and ensure that they are properly distributed and disseminated.
5. Present initiatives in the form of stories
6. Play a role in influencing the formal educational structures
7. Play the role of "think tank for non-formal education" and then transform ideas into action.
8. Promote community initiatives in locations where they have no clue about them: banks, commercial institutions, etc...
9. Organize meetings for initiatives working with children outside school.
10. Focus on writing, publishing, and distribution of books
11. Organize meetings on the Arabic language
12. Organize a festival in cooperation with the public sector for children from the various Arab countries to present their expressions in writing, drama, singing, etc...
13. Promote inspiring initiatives by inviting them to speak in various Arab countries and inviting the relevant public and non-governmental organizations and bodies to hear about the initiative.
14. Urge ministries of education to allocate 1% of their budget for community and non-formal educational activities for children.
15. Become involved in the "training of trainers" in the field of the Arts: how can the artist be artist and educator at the same time?
16. Use the website as a bulletin board for the presentation of experiences, reflections, news, etc...