



## NDC PILOT PROJECT INCREASES THE RESILIENCY OF PALESTINIANS IN AREA C

“Beit Skarya exists!” said one resident of Beit Skarya, referring to their new Facebook page for the village run by the recently established Women’s Association.

Beit Skarya, home to about 600 Palestinians, gets easily omitted amongst the twelve surrounding Israeli settlements that make up the Gush Etzion settlement complex near Bethlehem. The sensitive location of Beit Skarya makes it subject to many constraints and obstacles typical of Palestinian villages located in Area C of the West Bank. These villages have limited access to education and health services, and are exposed to inadequate public service infrastructure and water scarcity due to restrictive planning and permitting processes, closure obstacles, restrictions of movement, and settler violence. These are all characteristics of Beit Skarya. However, funding from the **Agence Française de Développement (AFD)** in coordination with the Palestinian Authority through the former Ministry of State for Wall and Settlement Affairs has enabled the **NGO Development Center (NDC)** in partnership with local organizations to address some of these issues. This includes the rehabilitation of old homes, the establishment of the Beit Skarya Women’s Association and several women empowerment activities. In 2013, the project has continued with land rehabilitation, training to improve economic opportunities, and psycho-social interventions for the residents.

There are around fifty houses in Beit Skarya, many of which are in poor conditions with substantial damp, mold and ventilation problems causing unhealthy living conditions. Some lack basic sanitation facilities, including a kitchen sink and bathroom. The former

Ministry of State estimated the needs for houses rehabilitation in Beit Skarya to be US\$700,000. NDC has partnered with **Riwaq** (Palestinian NGO specializing in the restoration of historic buildings) to rehabilitate the homes in most need. To date **Riwaq** has refurbished nine houses, and continued to work on a further six. Na’ema Sa’ad’s house was one of them. The rehabilitation of her house solved the issues of humidity and ventilation, and provided essential bathroom and kitchen facilities. As expressed by Na’ema Sa’ad “*I have a real home now! I no longer suffer from dyspnea. I now have my own bathroom, I have my own kitchen, and above all, the atmosphere in the house is healthy! My personal condition is so much better– I’m no longer scared for the future of my well-being.*”



Na’ema Sa’ad hosts people in her rehabilitated home

The primary source of income in Beit Skarya is agriculture, but since the village is subject to settler violence, this source of income is vulnerable. One resident, Fatima Hasan, describes how in previous years when they had planted corn, the settlers cut the stalks down at night only to prop them up again so that the crops looked fine from a distance. For a farmer, every seedling is an investment, and damaged crops can mean the loss of income for an entire year. Many farmers in Beit Skarya cannot afford to take the risk of investing labor and money in the land, when returns are being destroyed.

Due to settler violence, much of the land around Beit Skarya has not been plowed in the last 2-3 years. Not only has this resulted in a degradation of income and food security in the village, but it will eventually also lead to the permanent loss of land. The law from the Ottoman period implies that any land that has remained uncultivated for a period of three years must be reverted to the state. Consequently, the farmers in Beit Skarya could lose their land to the Israeli Civil Administration since it is located in Area C. With this real threat in mind, the YMCA has begun working with farmers in Beit Skarya to rehabilitate the land and provide seedlings for planting. To date, 80 dunums of land have been rehabilitated, an area much higher than what the YMCA had estimated because of the farmers' eagerness to devote time and labor in rehabilitating their own land. According to the Village Council leader Abu Ibrahim "Working together encourages others to work on their land too. Before, there was too much fear to invest in the land because the settlers would just destroy it. But together the community shares the risk and we support each other."

There is no grocery store, bakery or any established businesses in Beit Skarya. To buy bread, groceries or other materials, or to even access services the residents must travel to nearby villages, but transportation in and out of the village is difficult. Therefore, NDC has partnered with the Arab Center for Agricultural Development (ACAD) to offer vocational training in baking, tailoring, hairdressing as well as training technicians on electrical appliances including mobile phone repairs, agricultural food processing and advanced agricultural techniques. This capacity building program has served the village twofold; not only has it brought services to the village but it has also boosted employment opportunities. Furthermore, the Women's Association established through the support of the YMCA

is now aiming to open a cooperative supermarket in the village.

The village has one primary school that has around 50 students studying until the seventh grade, after which they either drop out of school or in some cases go to continue their education in the nearby villages. "Our children are isolated here," said one woman, "there is no safe place for children to play because of threats from the settlers, and with transportation difficulties it is hard to take them out of the village to interact with other children, or to participate in events like summer camps or school competitions and sports." The Palestinian Counseling Center (PCC) is joining the team of NGOs coordinated by NDC to address some of the psycho-social needs of the people in the village. One of their goals, in addition to offering individual and group counseling sessions, is to build a playground where children can play. They believe providing a safe space for children will help address some of the symptoms such as anxiety, fear, hyperactivity and concentration difficulties as expressed by the children in Beit Skarya .



Children in Beit Skarya need a safe place to play.

Today in Beit Skarya, the hope for a better life is palpable. For many years they have been alone in their suffering, but with the funding from AFD and the combined efforts of Riwaq, YMCA, ACAD and the PCC, through NDC's cross-sectoral approach, they are able to witness remarkable life quality improvements. Beit Skarya will continue to exist through the multiple efforts that aim at strengthening the resiliency of the Palestinian people to remain on their land in Area C.



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