

SECTION II: OUTCOMES REQUIRING ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION

1. SUMMARY

That none of the data suggested failures or hinted at unintended consequences provides another form of validation of YSEP'09. Even where some outcomes were weak, the fundamental precept "do no harm" was observed.

Some of the evaluation's findings for primary program objectives were so ambiguous that conclusions could not be drawn. Ambiguity in the data could have resulted from any number of problems unrelated to the actual outcomes. Participants may not have recognized what they learned:

"For sure, this experiment has taught each and every one of us a lot, although most of the things we have gained, we haven't realized them yet. Maybe we will never realize them, but they will always be there in our daily life, in our daily actions, in our daily decisions." (Participant, Texas Pin Ceremony transcript)

Or, participants were uncertain that observed changes could be attributed to the program:

"There are things that changed in the last one or two months, that I can't tell if it came out of the program or from my ripeness." (Participant, Exit Interview)

Furthermore, the form and language of each question and context in which it was asked could have significant bearing on a response. A case-in-point occurred when an on-line survey asked each respondent to use a number scale to rate his/her agreement with the statement "I communicate more effectively." Outcomes using only this scale would seem relatively good. But, when the same participants answered similar but open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview, the majority of answers were hesitant, qualified or ambivalent.

Given the importance of these objectives, additional review and evaluation is recommended for three areas:

- The most prominent and frequent concern raised by participants were the impediments to sustaining connections between members and maintaining active networks.
- Participant lost both clarity and confidence in program-transmitted knowledge of communication and conflict resolution skills over the period of assessments.
- The goal of promoting "respect for the environment" may require more development. Every alumni spoke of their new-found appreciation for the experience of nature. But this appreciation was described as spiritual and physical enjoyment. It was not clear if any participants had made the conceptual leap necessary to translate "respect for the environment" into an awareness of human impacts or a sense of responsibility.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE NETWORKING:

Throughout the program, participants described the importance of the group identity they had established in Texas. Some felt that this group identity had created an atmosphere of trust and security, in turn fostering the deeper personal connection. In the words of one participant,

"The group was transformed from a group of individuals participating in a "program", into a solid and coherent group of social entrepreneurs, and then it even evolved into some sort of a special and strong friendship, to the

point that each and every participant feels a level of safety and belonging that I've never witnessed before in such programs.”

By November 2010, most felt the group identity had dissipated, leaving behind a loose web of relationships between individuals. 4/5ths of the alumni identified these connections with other participants as “long-term relationships.” The characterization of those connections naturally varied between individuals, ranging from “positive, cordial, respectful” to “like family”. But one participant’s lament, “I do feel I wish we could all be a better community of leaders together, not just supporting from the outside, but being more involved in each other’s actions.” (1-Yr Follow-up) described a global sense of loss.

It’s unclear if sustaining group identity will be important to long-term peace building goals. This will remain an important question for OBCPB programs so long as the creation of “active networks of leaders” continues to be a central goal.

Participants suggested:

- Culminating with or incorporating into the program a long-term joint project;
- Develop program activities which help participants to transfer the group-building experience formed while sharing dramatic experiences (rafting and rock climbing) to familiar “everyday” circumstances;
- Provide further workshops or skills training in “networking”;
- Ask the participants to discuss the relationship between group formation, networking and coalition building;
- Improve their understanding of strategies for sustaining networks, leveraging networks;
- Develop and support participant initiatives to sustain their own networks;
- Provide logistical and/or financial support for additional reunion activities. (Organization support can be especially important in conflict area where the logistics of checkpoints, and potential risks associated with meeting the “enemy” should be accounted for);
- Promote continued intra-group mentorship and coaching, consulting or brainstorming between group members. (One participant felt he would have benefitted from coaching from one of his peers)

2. RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE TRANSMISSION OF COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS:

Transmission of communication and conflict management skills are the centerpiece of the YSEP’09 mission. During active phases participants reported increased self-awareness, sensitivity to communication dynamics, and the acquisition of new skills. Immediately after the catalyst expedition, eleven participant listed communication skills as among the most important lessons they took from the experience (Post Texas Questionnaire). However, as time passed after the active experiences, self-awareness and confidence in using skills waned. By November 2010, only 5 of 11 alumni agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that as a result of YSEP’09, “I communicate more effectively with other people,” while 4 were ambivalent. The findings for conflict management were similar.

Respondents had difficulty translating feelings and experiences into specifics and struggled to give names to skills. When asked to give examples of better conflict management skills, the most common response was “I am more patient” or “I can accept criticism.” “Listening” was the only communication skill participants consistently named. Further confusion arose around the distinction between personality and skill: “I learned how to approach things. I gained a lot of personal attributes rather than skills. (Participant, Exit Interview.)

Two possible program tweaks might include:

- An activity or component(s) which focuses on indentifying and naming skills/practices. Additional knowledge about the distinctions between changing ones personality (not possible) and making use of skills (possible);
- Almost all participants expressed a desire for more specific skills training. Some requested additional coaching.

3. FINAL THOUGHTS

The scope of this evaluation and the limits of the data will ultimately leave critical readers adrift in the fog of un-asked questions. They must be left for the future, for new programs and further research. As OBCPB and SFCG's partnership develops, there will be exciting opportunities to explore the mechanism of peace-building, to ask study the connections between activities and results, results and impacts. Were alumni able to influence organizations and communities or build their networks? Were there other impacts? Is it possible to test the underlying assumptions about the relevance of leadership training to peace-building in the Middle East correct?

Once can confidently state that YSEP'09 had positive results for its participants. The program was built on the substantial experience of two highly respected organizations with extensive experience in international leadership training, experiential education and conflict resolution. That expertise and the skill of the individual facilitators/coaches resonates in the successes described in the evaluation and the appreciation expressed by the alumni.

