

Managing international projects with countries in conflict

A small peace institute in San Diego has successfully brought together countries in conflict to collaborate on research and applied agricultural projects in the Middle East. **Bonnie Stewart** describes how a small institute is making a difference in the world.

The Fred J Hansen Institute for World Peace was established at the San Diego State University Research Foundation in 1979 thanks to the generosity and foresight of Fred J Hansen. Mr Hansen came to the United States from Denmark at the age of ten. He was successful in his career as an avocado grower and real estate developer and as a result, in his later years, he had the opportunity to travel throughout the world.

From these travels, Mr Hansen became convinced that world peace could be achieved in part by better understanding among individuals living in areas in conflict. More important, if these individuals could be brought together to work on projects of mutual benefit, international understanding would be fostered. The mission of the institute is based on these convictions.

Peace through agriculture 1980-2007

The early founders of the Hansen Institute were faced with the challenge of bringing people together from countries in conflict in order to foster mutual understanding. This was not an easy task. A region in the world and key participants had to be identified. A program that would be of interest and value to all the participants was needed. A well-constructed plan and a source of funding needed to be figured out. Once funding was secured, either through a grant application process or through individual solicitations, the task of managing the project had to be tackled – a formidable accomplishment when dealing internationally with countries in conflict.

For the Hansen Institute team back in 1980, it turned out that timing was everything. President Jimmy Carter, President Anwar Sadat and Prime Minister Menachem Begin had recently concluded the Camp David Peace Accords, which was viewed as a breakthrough in the peace



The Moroccan Technical Committee visits coastal agriculture regions in Israel

stalemate in the Middle East. Consequently, the Hansen team decided that the Middle East would be the area where they would focus their efforts. They made a fact-finding trip to Israel and Egypt, and it was during this visit that Egypt and Israel agreed to cooperate in agriculture and desert development. These topics were of highest mutual interest and economic benefit to both countries; this became the focus for the Hansen Institute.

The early years of the program involved Egypt, Israel and the US. By 1992, the collaborations were expanded to include Morocco. Even though political relations between Israel and Morocco had not yet been established, high government authorities in both countries requested that the cooperative programs be established. The government of Morocco requested that we work with the private sector – another formidable challenge. In 1998, the cooperative programs were further expanded to include the Palestinian Authority and Jordan. Then the

political situation in the region deteriorated.

In 2001, opportunities for applied work in the region had declined significantly. One step forward and two steps back seemed to summarise the situation. However, because of the existence of the internet, it was easier to maintain our contacts throughout the region – a task impossible ten years earlier. Finally, by 2006, the political situation in the Middle East improved. The Hansen Institute began working again in collaboration with the Peres Center for Peace to promote peace through agriculture.

How have these complicated projects with countries in conflict been managed? Once the region and partners are identified and the program plans developed and funding is secured, how does one manage the program?

Managing the programs

Peace through agriculture was a winning formula in fostering international understanding. Managing these programs was challenging. No one formula worked but there were five basic areas to address: political, technical, logistical, financial and contract reporting to program sponsors. For the early programs, the Hansen Institute was the umbrella organisation for the program and provided administrative and programmatic oversight. This was done because the countries in the region were not able to openly work together and it was easier to have an outside organisation to spearhead the work.

A steering committee, made up of key individuals in each participating country, was established for the purpose of discussing cooperation and addressing any political issues that might inhibit technical progress. The committee met twice a year in alternating countries in the region, even though political events some-

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Egyptian, Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian, Moroccan, Italian, American and other delegates at the Peres Center/Hansen Institute-sponsored Integrated Crop Management, Market and Product Development Workshop, November 2006, in Cairo, Egypt

times made it difficult to meet and work together. The steering committee found ways to resolve problems such as getting visas, permits for travellers, or resolving personal differences that caused disruption in the program.

The technical committee handled the science and the business aspects of the program. Scientists and business partners met twice a year to discuss the collaborative research and to address the project demonstration sites in each country. In Israel, the sites included research institutes where scientists from each country collaborated in the development of new varieties of fruits or vegetables best adapted to desert regions. In Egypt and Morocco, the project sites included demonstration farms where new crop varieties were tested for their adaptability. New production technologies and new crops were demonstrated to the local farmers. An Israeli farm manager worked with Egyptian and Moroccan counterparts to establish and run the project site and to manage the export and business aspects of the farms.

The logistical, financial management and agency interface for the regional cooperation programs were handled by the US Program Director of the Hansen Institute. This was done because it was difficult for countries in the region to work together directly. Although the situation today has improved for the most part there is still a need for outside partnerships.

The logistical management was by far the most difficult and problematic area of the collaboration. Getting scientists and project participants to all the participating countries was influenced in part by the overall political environment. Travel was not easy. Permits for scientists to leave their countries and visas for them to enter another country took time and effort, involving letters from the Hansen Institute to consulates and employers and often

intervention from the country's steering committee representative who was always politically connected. Once permits and visas were secured, travel was not always guaranteed pending political events in the region. Furthermore, finding a time that was mutually available was also problematic. Major holidays for all the religions in the region resulted in a significantly narrowed period of time available for meetings.

The fiscal oversight was managed by the US Program Director. The budget included money for collaborative activities such as the technical and steering committee meetings and money for in-country activities such as the demonstration site development. Subcontracts were issued to the partners to cover the in-country activities. The subcontract budgets were managed by a university, a government organisation or by a fiduciary agent equipped with the necessary fiscal checks and balances. The fiscal management approach for these regional projects varied depending on the nature of the contract and the partners involved. Timing and budget flexibility was negotiated based on best fiscal management practices and the abilities of the local organisations to adhere to these requirements.

The programmatic oversight was performed by the US Program Director in cooperation with the country coordinators and the Technical Committee Director. It was important to make sure the program achieved the stated objectives and also to report the accomplishments to the program sponsors. However, making sure that the technical objectives were met was not always as straightforward as it seemed. Action items discussed by the steering and the technical committees were clearly defined at the meetings. Once participants returned to their home countries, however, competing demands for their time made follow-up a challenge. In order to keep on track, regular communication

and follow-up action item lists were essential. Such communication during the early programs was more difficult and costly since the internet was not readily available. Periodic phone and regular fax communications between the US Program Director and the Country Coordinators were the main approach for monitoring technical progress and addressing problems. This changed in the late 1990s when email communication became common, when global systems worked efficiently and the software compatibility issues were resolved. Managing collaborative programs with countries in conflict requires regular communication among partners – direct communication and face-to-face meetings are the best. Reporting accomplishments as well as obstacles to the program sponsors is important for continued success.

Managing international projects with countries in conflict is challenging. The various political situations impact the ability of participants to meet, travel and communicate with one another. During the course of a program this situation may change – for better or worse. Successful programs must be of high priority to the countries and individuals involved, must benefit a large number of people and must generate scientific and economic dividends. Peace can be achieved only through the dedication and hard work of individuals who are committed to this goal. There is no model that will work for every area of the world – but a creative and flexible fiscal and programmatic management approach is needed in order to adapt to the constantly changing political environment, whilst accomplishing the technical objectives that will pave the way toward international understanding and peace. RG

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