

# IDRC in Yemen

**I**DRC has supported research in Yemen since 1989. Initiatives in the region have focused on agriculture, water scarcity, health, and education.

As an example of current IDRC-supported research, Yemen is one of six countries under study in an exploration of political party development in the Arab world. Yemen constitutes an interesting case as both tribal groups and a prominent Islamist political party seeking to influence policy development campaigned for the presidency during the September 2006 elections. President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in office since 1999, was re-elected. The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies in Beirut, Lebanon, is coordinating the project and experts from Yemen are contributing to the research. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) is also supporting this effort.

Yemen is considered an agricultural economy, as this activity contributes 18 percent of the

gross national product and three-quarters of the population live in rural areas. It is also in this sector that past IDRC-supported research has made its most significant contribution in the country. With IDRC support, the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), based in Syria, conducted three phases of research in the 1990s to revive traditional mountain terrace agriculture, which plays an important role in water conservation. ICARDA sought to understand why Yemeni farmers were abandoning terraces and to find ways to reverse this trend. Initially farmers were sceptical about returning to terrace agriculture using new techniques, but many have now done so. Yemen's Ministry of Agriculture has pledged financing to continue the support for this traditional farming system.

Currently, IDRC is supporting research carried out by Sana'a University that focuses on rural diets and local food production systems to enhance food security.

## IDRC in Yemen

Agriculture practiced in Yemeni cities also requires careful study and sound municipal policies to ensure that urban farming practices do not put public health or the environment at risk while improving livelihoods and food security. To learn from other experiences in the region, a team of researchers and city advisers participated in a course on urban agriculture, which was held in September 2005 by the American University of Beirut with IDRC support.

Yemen is also one of nine participants included in an extensive regional initiative related to water demand management (WDM) that focuses on making better use of existing water resources. IDRC, CIDA, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development have set up *WaDimena*, a five-year program coordinated by IDRC. The program is building on the capacity of policy and research communities and civil society in the Middle East and North Africa to develop ways to use existing water resources more efficiently, equitably, and sustainably. In Yemen, researchers are testing refinements to the traditional practice of using mosque greywater to improve crop yields and conserve groundwater, with the goal of influencing national water policies.

The Centre has contributed more than CA\$2.2 million, over 17 years, to 10 research activities involving Yemen. Some of these were regional in scope. The Centre's investment in the three ongoing initiatives that involve Yemen amounts to CA\$1.2 million.

### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

#### Political Party Development in the Arab World

In recent years, new political parties have emerged in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Gulf countries, with Islamist parties eclipsing nationalist ones. Little is known about the link between party development in the region and democratic practices or about the newer parties emerging under the banner of religion and religious ideology. Still fewer studies have taken a cross-country comparative approach.

With support from IDRC and CIDA, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) is exploring political party development in Yemen, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, and Bahrain. In these six Arab countries, political parties are participating in elections and have some policy influence; as well, governments have taken some encouraging steps toward democratization and a multiparty political process.

LCPS aims to inform policy debates on how to improve democratic practices in the Arab world through the reform and democratization of political parties. Experts, researchers, and academics from each of the six countries will develop policy recommendations and highlight the factors that contribute to the flourishing and institutionalization of political parties.

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## Local Food Production and Dietary Diversity

An increasing reliance on food imports and a strong push to promote irrigation, chemical inputs, and new crop varieties are affecting rural livelihoods, especially in the rain-fed highland regions of the country, home to the poorest and more marginalized communities in Yemen. While these policies may provide larger quantities of food in the short run, the nutritional quality of this food, its accessibility by the poorest, its environmental sustainability, and the potential impact on human health are unknown.

Researchers, led by the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at Sana'a University, aim to improve the health of the poor in the highland regions and enhance sustainable natural resources management by promoting traditional rural diets and local food production systems. Together with community members and local institutions, researchers are collecting data on local landraces, the agro-ecological system, health indicators, and indigenous knowledge of agricultural practices. The project includes some soil and water laboratory testing. The nutritional value of landraces and recipes is also being assessed. The project stakeholders are identifying

and testing the best options that will contribute to sustainable economic development and improved health. The team will hold a national workshop at the end of the project to share the results and make its policy recommendations public.

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## A Course on Urban Agriculture

Interest in urban agriculture as a development tool has grown rapidly since the mid-1990s. If promoted with sound policies and practices, farming in the city can reduce poverty, improve nutrition, ease the demand for waste disposal (through composting), and beautify the urban environment. IDRC's partners in the Middle East and North Africa had asked for training on the subject, particularly, on how to translate research into action.

IDRC support enabled the American University of Beirut to design, deliver, and evaluate a three-week training course on urban agriculture for teams of researchers and city advisers, which was held in September 2005. The University developed Arabic language materials for use during the workshop and as resources for the future. Seven multidisciplinary city teams with

## IDRC in Yemen

experience in urban agriculture attended the course; one city team was from Yemen. The others came from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, West Bank and Gaza, Algeria, and Tunisia. Three of the cities will be selected to develop pilot projects that reflect lessons learned during the course.

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