

# IDRC in Egypt

**I**DRC has directed much of its recent support in Egypt toward helping farmers gain access to scarce water and make better use of this resource. Research funded by the Centre also aimed to improve living conditions for the poor and enhance opportunities for small businesses to compete in global markets.

Farmers resettling desert land west of Lake Nasser are the focus of one current example of IDRC-supported research. The Centre is providing funds to the Near East Foundation (NEF), a US-based international nongovernmental organization, for its work with community members, as well as with local and national decision-makers, to ensure that the settlers integrate successfully, with minimal environmental impact on the fragile ecosystem.

There has been strong support for this initiative from the Egyptian government, as it plans to settle approximately 1 million people around Lake Nasser by 2017, as part of a strategy to combat poverty through agricultural development of reclaimed desert land. Interaction between the project team and policymakers has already resulted in policy changes. Agencies have begun to coordinate their work in the area and a new department, staffed by employees the NEF has trained, will monitor chemical use in an advisory capacity to farmers.

The largest IDRC-supported initiative in Egypt, also funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), is helping the government as it develops policies to encourage

growth in small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs). The initiative, led by the Economic Research Forum for the Arab Countries, based in Cairo, has had a clear impact on the policy environment. Four years of activity have led to a more favourable regulatory framework, revisions to the income tax regime, and changes to the Tender Law for government procurement. IDRC plans to support similar research in other Middle Eastern and North African countries.

Egypt is one of nine participants involved in an extensive regional initiative related to water demand management (WDM), which focuses on making better use of existing water resources. Over the past decade, IDRC, CIDA, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development have supported numerous research projects and a network of researchers on WDM in the Middle East. In 2004, these donor agencies set up *WaDiMena*, a five-year program coordinated by IDRC, as a new source of funding for Middle Eastern and North African researchers. Based at IDRC's regional office in Cairo, the program will help the policy and research communities and civil society develop policies and practical solutions for more efficient, equitable, and sustainable use of existing water resources.

Egyptian policymakers will have access to an Economic Research Forum study of overlapping international trade agreements in Arab countries that IDRC is supporting. Egypt will also benefit from a Centre-supported effort led by two nongovernmental organizations to promote the availability, in Arabic and African languages, of computer and Internet software and content

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and their adaptation to local modes of communication, culture, and standards. As well, a group of IDRC partners are aiming to bridge the African continent's "digital divide." They will provide information and training to African decision-makers, to help them make appropriate technology choices for wireless networks as a low-cost and dynamic complement to wired infrastructure.

IDRC has been involved in Egypt since 1971. The country is the region's strongest focus of Centre activity. IDRC established its Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa in Cairo in 1976. Since September 2005, Dr Ahmed Galal, Executive Director and Director of Research of the independent think-tank the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies, has been a member of IDRC's Board of Governors.

Over 35 years, IDRC has allocated CA\$28 million to 185 projects, some of which were regional in scope. Currently, there are 10 active projects, valued at just over CA\$6 million.

### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

#### Healthy and Sustainable Resettlement

The Egyptian government's national strategy to combat poverty through agricultural development of reclaimed desert land includes plans to settle about 1 million people around Lake Nasser by 2017. Experience has shown, however, that new settlers experience difficulties and hardships, and can have adverse environmental impact on fragile ecosystems. In the lake area, the desert soils have low fertility levels, but the proximity of Lake Nasser, one of the world's largest fresh water reservoirs, and the favourable climatic conditions — including a year-round growing season — make the farming potential high. The settlers, however, lack knowledge of desert agriculture and of the special features of this ecosystem.

Researchers from the Near East Foundation are working closely with members of three West Lake Nasser communities, comprising 2 500 small landholding families, and with local and national decision-makers to encourage sustain-

able improvements to household incomes and positive environmental actions. The project team is conducting experimental research on crops to improve yields. Its interactions with policymakers has already led to several policy changes, such as the establishment of a department responsible for advising farmers about the proper use of chemicals and a regular meeting of agencies working in the lake area to coordinate work plans.

(Project # 102376, Agro-Ecology West of Lake Nasser: Toward a Sustainable Livelihoods Strategy; Duration: 2004–2007; IDRC allocation: CA\$478 760; IDRC contact: Lamia El-Fattal; Lead research organization: Near East Foundation, New York, USA; Local partner: Ahmed Farouk, Community Development Services, 4 Ahmed Pasha Street, 11th floor, Garden City, Cairo, Egypt)

#### Improving the Small Business Climate

Small, medium, and micro-enterprises (SMMEs) are critical in dealing with Egypt's employment challenges. Though government, NGOs, and donor agencies have established programs aimed at these enterprises, the overall policy environment for SMME development remains weak, in part because of decades of large-scale, state-sponsored industrialization efforts.

The Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade is responsible for coordinating national SMME policy. The research of the nongovernmental Economic Research Forum for the Arab Countries (ERF), based in Cairo, supports the Ministry's efforts to develop policies, legislation, and regulations. Indeed, their collaboration has already led to improvements aimed at small entrepreneurs. The government has adopted a new vision for SMME development with concrete measures and timelines that will help enterprises become competitive in the global marketplace. Revisions to the income tax regime and changes to the Tender Law for government procurement, as a result of the research, also promote SMME growth. At the same time, the ERF is strengthening the Ministry's capacity through training and technical assistance and is promoting links between the Ministry and the many actors involved, including the entrepreneurs themselves.

(Project # 100067, Promoting Competitiveness in the Micro and Small Enterprise Sector; Duration: 2000–2006; IDRC allocation: CA\$500 000; IDRC contact: Kameir El Wathig; Research partner: Dr Heba Handoussa, Economic Research Forum, 7 Boulos Hanna Street, Dokki, Cairo, Egypt; Email: erf@erf.org.eg)

## Understanding the Impact of Trade Agreements

**D**uring the last decade, Arab countries have signed a number of regional trade agreements (RTAs). Unfortunately their implementation has never been studied in a systematic way. There are gaps between what such RTAs state and what is actually implemented. A better understanding of the reasons behind the existing gaps would contribute greatly to policy-making and academic research. In particular, policy-makers need information on the net impact of RTAs on the economies of participating Arab countries. Such information would help shape efforts to improve the implementation of existing arrangements and the negotiation and design of future agreements.

The Economic Research Forum is analyzing the situation in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia. The resulting paper will serve as a vehicle to highlight priority issues. Researchers will then take a more focused look at Egypt and Morocco, addressing the net impact of overlapping RTAs. Roundtable sessions will be held to discuss results.

(Project # 102235, Policy Implications for Overlapping Preferential Trade Agreements in Arab Countries; Duration: 2004–2006; IDRC allocation: CA\$322 000; IDRC contact: Susan Joekes; Research partner: Dr Hana Kheir el Din, Economic Research Forum for the Arab Countries, 7 Boulos Hanna Street, Dokki, Cairo, Egypt; Tel: 202-7602882; Fax: 202-7616042; Email: erf@erf.org.eg)

## Healthy People, Healthy Land

**E**l-Fayoum Province is a large agricultural oasis irrigated by a branch of the Nile River. Because of the high level of subsoil water and poor drainage, there is a prevalence of water-related diseases, such as malaria, in the region. This situation is exacerbated by poor land and water management prac-

tics and by environmental pollution, mainly from the heavy use of pesticides and fertilizers that contaminate drinking water. Researchers from the lead organization, Alexandria University, and other institutions, government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations will investigate whether better natural resource management practices and policies — based on strong community participation — will improve the health of humans and that of the ecosystem itself.

(Project # 100771-003, Development of Health Interventions for El-Fayoum: A Holistic Agro-ecosystem Approach, Phase II; Duration: 2005–2007; IDRC allocation: CA\$327 863; IDRC contact: Lamia El-Fattal; Research partner: Fawzy Kishk, Alexandria University, Alexandria, Egypt; Website: www.alex.edu.eg)

## Using Social Values to Better Manage Water

**W**ith renewable water resources amounting to less than 30 cubic metres per person, Egypt tops the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's list of water-scarce countries. Researchers in the Faculty of Agriculture of Minia University are examining the social and cultural values of water, as well as traditional and modern ways of managing it in the Minia governorate. The researchers based their work on the understanding that effective irrigation must address political, technical, management, and water user needs. As a result of the research, all the stakeholders — including policymakers and farmers — came together to discuss what is and what is not working in community management of water. Researchers found that while water user associations reduce conflict among users along the same water supply, farmers still do not demonstrate ownership of these associations, which puts their viability and sustainability at risk. They also noted that government should take a greater role in supporting this type of collective local management.

(Project # 101018, Social Values and Management of Water in Egypt; Duration: 2002–2005; IDRC allocation: CA\$157 500; IDRC contact: Lamia El-Fattal; Research partner: M.A. Kishk, Service Laboratory for Soil, Water, and Plant Analysis, Soil Science Department, Faculty of Agriculture, Minia University, Minia, Egypt 6111)

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### Software and Web Content in Local Languages and Cultures

It is generally agreed that software and content need to be available in a familiar language for users to adopt and make optimal use of computers and the Internet. Yet almost all software and Internet content are developed in English and a few other Western languages. This project, led by the US-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Kabissa, aims ultimately to make information and communication technologies (ICTs) more accessible and relevant to multilingual users in North Africa by speeding up the localization — the adaptation to local languages, cultures, and preferences — of computer software and Web content. This will in turn make technology a much more powerful tool for social and economic development in rural areas.

In this three-year project, Kabissa is partnering with several US and local NGOs, associations, and institutes. The project involves an initial survey of the current state of localization in Africa; a workshop in which African and other experts will exchange information and identify areas for collaboration; and a Web-based database of localization resources for software developers and content authors.

(Project # 102933, PAN Africa Localization: Enhancing Capacities for Localization of Arabic and African Languages; Duration: 2005–2008; IDRC allocation: CA\$312 100; IDRC contact: Adel El-Zaïm; Lead Research partner: Kim Lowry, Kabissa Inc., 1519 Connecticut Avenue, Suite 200, Washington DC 20036, USA. Tel: (202) 265-6116. Fax: (702) 441-8964. Email: info@kabissa.org Web site: www.kabissa.org.)

### Bridging the “Digital Divide” with Wireless Technology

The high cost of conventional “wired” infrastructure is a barrier to ICT access and social change in developing countries. By contrast, less cumbersome wireless technologies, such as WiFi and WiMax, can deliver tested, low-cost telecommunications to complement conventional networks. They are particularly effective in places where no infrastructure exists, helping communities to “leapfrog” generations of existing technology. To make “bridging the digital divide” a reality will require an appropriate integration of investment in both wired and wireless infrastructures, and a joint effort by governmental, profit, and nonprofit sectors.

A group of African partners is conducting workshops, providing face-to-face training in how to set up community wireless networks, and creating classroom curricula in English, French, and Arabic for an online repository of information on wireless technologies, among other components.

(Project # 102693, Capacity Building for Community Wireless Connectivity in Africa; Duration: 2004–2006; IDRC allocation: CA\$319 870; IDRC contact: Adel El-Zaïm; Research partner: Ann Tothill, Association for Progressive Communications, APC Secretariat, Presidio Building 1012, Torrey Avenue P.O. Box 29904, San Francisco, CA 94129 USA. Executive Director's Office: PO Box 29755, Melville 2109, South Africa. Tel: +27 11 726 1692. Fax: +27 11 726 1692. Email: webeditor@apc.org.)

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