

Interview with Yossi Offer on the training "Integrated approach for upgrading poor urban areas"

Following the training on "Integrated approach for upgrading poor urban areas", held from 4 July to 2 August 2011

Out of the slums

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Israel shares its experience with leaders from Africa, Asia and South-East Europe on upgrading substandard housing without evicting residents.



Officials from 15 African, Asian and Eastern European countries were in Israel in July to learn tactics for upgrading slum housing.

By Avigayil Kadesh

About one billion people across the planet live in slums. International development organizations have been investing resources and efforts in tackling this issue, as one of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals is to "achieve significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020." But despite some successes, the situation has continued to worsen as rural-urban migration and natural demographic growth continue to aggravate the problem.

Enter Israel's [Weitz Center for Development Studies](#) in Rehovot, which provides month-long training courses on upgrading poor urban neighborhoods and communities. The program is sponsored by [MASHAV](#), Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation.

Israel - working in cooperation with the United Nations agency UN-Habitat for the past two years - has made a name for itself on the international circuit for its experience in upgrading poor urban residential areas.

In July, a group of 31 participants from 15 African, Asian and Eastern European countries came for a session, representing such countries as Kosovo, Montenegro, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda, Myanmar and Thailand.

"One of the key components of the training is to build partnerships between the private and public sector. It enables participants to increase the impact of their work back home," explains Training Director Yossi Offer, an Israeli expert in urban and regional planning. "The magnitude of the problem means that, even where governments and development aid is

available for slum upgrading, there are simply not enough resources to make a real difference for all slum dwellers. For this reason, it is important to involve the private sector. But by doing so, it is critical to involve the dwellers, and to ensure that there will be physical, social and economic benefits for the slum-dwellers and not only for the private sector."

These public-private partnerships require organizational and financial platforms, which the training also addresses.

Adapting Israeli know-how to local needs

According to Offer, Israel has gained significant experience in upgrading and revitalizing its own poor urban neighborhoods since the 1970s. However, these areas in Israel are quite different from the slums of the developing world. "Our accumulated knowledge on the approaches, strategies and tools is relevant and can benefit decision-makers and professionals involved in slum upgrading. But it must be adapted to local conditions," he says. The Israeli approach and experience is therefore presented as a trigger for discussions and exercises with the participants, leaving room for them to develop solutions relevant to unique local conditions.

The Weitz Center's staff, made up of Israeli experts from public, private and third sectors, and a UN-Habitat official, present and share experiences in class and in the field. Exercises and workshops help integrate and "translate" the material to the local conditions of the participants' regions.

"Our experience in Israel and in the developing world enables us to facilitate the process and to help participants to acquire practical and relevant tools", " says Offer, who emphasizes that the methods taught never include eviction of residents - a tactic sometimes employed in countries where the private sector is involved. "We always focus on the empowerment of the public sector."

For the UN, the Israeli training is an important piece in the international effort to achieve its millennium goals and to ensure environmental sustainability. Promoting programs to upgrade slums and provide services for their residents includes creating databases, formulating action plans and capacity-building of stakeholders from the investment side as well as the resident side.

"MASHAV covers all costs aside from air fare," says Offer, though some of the participants' tickets were paid for by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). "We got more than 100 applications for the training, and we select them according to their work in urban upgrading, and their ability to continue doing something practical upon their return," he explains.

The Weitz Center conducts training in English and in Spanish and remains in contact with all graduates as they begin applying the strategic planning tools they learned in their home countries. The participants in the Israeli programs include planners, architects, engineers, economists, community workers, administrators and policy-makers.

"Our approach is not to teach but to enable learning. It is practical rather than academic," Offer says. "The participants are professionals, not students, and their knowledge and experiences enable a dialogue between the participants and with the lecturers."