

Future Workshop by HBS
Oct.6 – Oct.11
(Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt)

The Future workshop took place in Hasankeyf, Turkey, from October 6, 2012 till October 11, 2012 where individuals from Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt came together to participate in it.

The three day workshop started with each one of the participants picking one picture revealing an environmental problem or issue, then talking about it and saying why it inspired them. We then were faced with environmental questions that needed to be answered, problems that needed solutions. The first day was actually divided into three sections, so three problematic were presented. We were also divided into four working groups, and each group brainstormed for solutions that they then presented to all of the participants. Basically, we were asked to present the major environmental problems we thought our region (the Middle East) is currently facing. The outcome was four main topics: Water, energy, soil and solid waste.

The ecosystem and natural resources are actually taken for granted, leading to over consumption and a high ecological footprint of products promoted to be bought then wasted.

One would really think that change will happen if people are more aware of their environment and of its exploitation. Well, some things do change, but sadly the big picture doesn't.

Nature and ecosystems must not become subject of commercial interest and investment.

Water

Water quantity

There is unequal distribution of the water resource in the Middle East, thing that has led to many conflicts and wars throughout history. Lebanon for example is very rich in water, having many rivers and precipitations throughout the year, this country was even called "Chateau d'eau", meaning "The Castle of Water" in French, unlike Jordan that lacks water, rivers and precipitations, and suffers from water scarcity.

The only way fighting this problem is by exchanging resources, governments must work together and sign treaties, contracts where both parties would win and exchange their abundant resources for their scarce ones. For example, Lebanon and Jordan could sign a treaty where Lebanon would give a

certain amount of water for Jordan by building a pipeline that links both countries, and Jordan would give Lebanon a certain amount of salts from the dead sea, having multiple health benefits.

Water quality

Although I have mentioned before that Lebanon is a country rich in water (View "Water Quantity" Section), the water resources are not well managed, there is no harvesting whatsoever for the precipitations, the rivers are polluted and used as dumps for solid waste including animal carcasses, dairy products and waste water. The water is also polluted from pesticides, these chemicals being over-used and infiltrating in the underground water.

Solid waste must not be dumped in water systems, governments need to make people more aware of the situation, and enforce fines and sanctions for all those who pollute water, whether they are companies or individuals.

The industries should be monitored, by an auditor assigned by the government and visiting them on an annual basis, inspecting their sewage system and putting sanctions and fines for every facility that dumps its residues/products in water/rivers, forcing them to change their ways by first of all placing a filter on their sewage system.

Household waste, known as wastewater or sewage system, must be managed as well. Water treatment facilities must be built and monitored in order to filter the wastewater, making it reusable for

watering plants or showering. What is shameful is that this sort of facilities do exist in the countries, but are not functional. There is one in Jbeil, Lebanon that is fully equipped but is not linked to the sewage system, because of political problems. The government is hindering the use of this facility, which is the solution for many Lebanese districts suffering from water pollution and having its wastewater dumped in the sea. The government must take action, set political conflicts aside, and think of what is best for the country itself.

Water scarcity and quality have led to wars in the Middle East in ancient times, and it will happen again if we do not act now! Conflicts are built around this matter, and wars may be triggered. Exchange of this resource and mutual work and treaties between governments is a must in order to prevent that from happening, by leading to distributional justice.

Energy

The energy system is based entirely on fossil fuel, however this natural resource is not renewable and people are starting to feel its scarcity. Although this is happening, there is no serious investment in renewable energy in the Middle East.

Most of the countries in the Middle East are blessed with at least 300 days of sun, and countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt have large spaces in the desert, that should be invested with building solar panels, that would sustain the whole country with energy. If there is over

production of energy, these Middle Eastern countries can sell them to others and thus benefit and have an income. So, Governments need to take action, promote the investment in renewable energy, and build its infrastructure, such as solar panels.

Other countries such as Lebanon and Turkey, that have water resources and wind, have the ability to invest in renewable energy using these two natural resources. The building of windmills is therefore possible and productive, sustaining the countries with energy.

In order to invest in water resources, there must be construction of dams, for the generation of power and electricity. It is known however that dams alter nature river flow and interfere with the life cycle of fish, so it is not well advised. It would be good if only one or two dams are constructed, and only after having assessed the situation and the environmental impact of the construction. Only when the ecological losses are minimal, can we build dams.

Soil

Land degradation

The over-population and random and uncontrolled constructions, along with forest destructions, have led to severe degradation of the soil. The only way to preventing this is by planting trees. It is a very simple concept, people need to be more aware of the importance of trees, them being oxygen providers and soil holders. A good start would be to give workshops at schools, so that kids would get triggered and

encouraged to plant trees since their youth.

Soil Pollution

Societies use pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, that can be very harmful for the soil. The societies are growing more and more, which leads to higher food demand and consumption, which gets them to use pesticides in order to maintain the quantity and quality of crops, making them grow faster and on a wider range. It is known that the planted land must rest between seasons. However, due to the overpopulation and thus over demand for food, farmers can not afford to do so, and after a few years, this land is no longer productive, and farmers leave it and go on to the next parcel, doing the same thing over again, with extensive use of pesticides. This is a vicious cycle that seems to have no end, knowing also that pesticides are very harmful to the soil, polluting it and damaging it. These chemicals also go through the soil into underground water, thus polluting water as well.

It is crucial to use less pesticides, farmers need to be more aware of the dangers of these chemicals. Also, land needs to rest, and the governments must promote that, by either giving two parcels of land to each farmer instead of one, or forcing each farmer to divide his own land into two parcels, making one part rest while the other is being used.

Solid Waste

There is over consumption in the Arab world, people tend to buy things that they don't even need, things that are not bio-degradable, repairable or reusable, so they tend to buy more and more of these things, after getting rid of the original purchase, creating more waste. Indeed, the system encourages you to: buy/spend/waste, it promotes nowadays consumption and encourages people to buy more, and they do so in order to keep up with the trend, fashion and gain prestige in society.

Also, the Middle Eastern communities get rid of solid waste the old fashioned-wrong-way. They either throw them away in uncontrolled landfills, such as the Landfill of Normandy in Lebanon, or they incinerate them, knowing that incinerators generate dioxins, which are practically poison that can lead to respiratory problems and eventually to lung cancer.

Nevertheless, these societies are getting more aware of the dreadful situation, and some of them are starting to recycle, reuse, and turn the organic matter into compost that is used as fertilizer.

People need to be more aware of what they are buying, the material and natural resources that were used in order to fabricate it. We need to stop this consumption system and learn from our ancestors that over consumption and materialistic things do not lead to happiness, we can perfectly be satisfied with what we already have. There must be therefore a strategic change of behavior.

Also, I believe that the zero waste concept is the answer. Zero waste is a goal that is ethical, economical, efficient and visionary, to guide people in changing their lifestyles and practices to emulate sustainable natural cycles, where all discarded materials are designed to become resources for others to use. Zero waste means designing and managing products and processes to systematically avoid and eliminate the volume and toxicity of waste and materials, conserve and recover all resources, and not burn or bury them. Implementing Zero waste will eliminate all discharges to land, water or air that are a threat to planetary, human, animal or plant health.

It is one's dream to reach a utopia, where man would live in harmony in nature and pollution would be hindered, everything would be green and Man would live in harmony with Mother Earth, in a sustainable way.

The only way to get to this Utopia is throughout collaboration between the governments and people, we must all work together and join forces, for we are more powerful when we work together.

Governments, NGOs and individuals must work together hand by hand in order to raise awareness about our natural resources, their consumption and their abundance, and empower youth, them being the future. If we get to the young generation and make them realize

the seriousness of the current environmental situations and over consumption of natural resources, we can guarantee that the future of our planet is not that dramatic, and change CAN happen.

We must act NOW. We cannot be like Al Gore's frog theory.

Al Gore explained that when you put a frog (Frog #1) in a pot with water, then put the pot on the fire, the frog would have no reaction whatsoever, because the water it is in is boiling step by step, little by little, making the amphibian not realize the danger.

However, if you put a frog (Frog #2) in a pot of boiling water, it will feel the burn, the pain and jump out of it immediately.

The Arabs seem to be the first frog, not sensing the danger of the over consumption of our natural resources, having lack of will and not taking any action. It is a shame to wait for a bigger natural disaster, that would certainly lead to a huge human loss, wait to be put in a "Frog #2" situation, in order to take action.

What we truly need is a commitment to work together.

Overall, the Future workshop was a success, bringing together individuals from four different countries, and making them think of ways to improve the current environmental situation in their region, the Middle East.

Hopefully, things will change to the better.

Michelle Matta

Lebanon

Middle East