



SUCCESS STORY

Sewing the Seeds of Opportunity in Beqaa



USAID/Lebanon

Graduates of the training program model hand-sewn abayas at an outdoor ceremony attended by 200 friends and family members.

“The youth graduating today learned an important skill that will help preserve our culture and enable them to find much-needed jobs.”

***—Omar Yassine
Governor of Beqaa***

June 2009 – A group of 56 young men and women from marginalized areas of Lebanon’s Beqaa region recently completed a unique vocational training program: they learned the art of sewing traditional clothing—a new skill that is providing them with employment opportunities and economic alternatives.

Entry-level jobs are especially scarce for the youth targeted by the training, many of whom have not completed high school or are unemployed. So to provide young people with marketable skills, the Baalbeck Association for Environment and Culture (BAEC), with support from USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), ran a 10-week training program to teach the 27 men and 29 women to sew dresses, traditional garments, and sports and school uniforms. The trainees, who ranged in age from 16 to 25, learned quickly and started producing garments after six weeks.

At the ceremony marking the end of the training, key figures from the region, including the Governor of Beqaa, addressed the graduates with words of encouragement. The ceremony also provided an audience for a fashion show as well as a stage for traditional dancing. Following the event, local businesspeople spoke with the graduates about opportunities, and potential customers examined the finished products on display.

The words of 16-year-old Raheel Makiye, who spoke at the ceremony, attest to the project’s impact. “The training program didn’t just teach us a skill—it built our character and gave us an opportunity to succeed in life through celebrating our common heritage,” she said.

BAEC also offered complementary training activities, including sales and marketing workshops, but the civic activism training was the clear favorite. Participants noted that the nonviolent communication and conflict resolution skills they learned were useful in interactions with customers and in many other areas of their lives. Some of the trainees went on to participate in a well-publicized “peace bus” tour, which was led by another local nongovernmental organization, Zico House, and was also supported by USAID.

Before the end of the program, eight trainees had been recruited by local companies; others aspire to open their own businesses. For all the participants, the program has broadened employment horizons, inspired hope, provided a counterweight to economic disenfranchisement, and spurred them to revive and take pride in their cultural traditions.