



SUCCESS STORY

Shooting Hoops for Peaceful Coexistence



USAID/Lebanon

Young men from conflict-affected neighborhoods in Beirut leave sectarian and political divisions behind for a friendly game of basketball.

“Even if the political atmosphere in Lebanon is bad, we grouped together under the GAM3 flag and we are from different religions and backgrounds. We forgot about our political points of view...we came here only to play basketball and have fun.”

—Hussein Dakrouni, a player in GAM3’s youth basketball program

December 2009 – For marginalized youth growing up in greater Beirut, organized sports programs are hard to find. Most private sports clubs in the region are affiliated with political parties. And basketball, the most popular sport in Lebanon, has not been exempt from this constraint. Many games played in mixed neighborhoods have ended in sectarian violence.

In an effort to provide youth with options, USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) partnered with GAM3 to build conflict resolution skills through street basketball.

GAM3, a nonprofit working to empower young people in Lebanon since 2007, recruited more than 500 underprivileged youths from conflict-affected Beirut suburbs to receive basketball coaching combined with conflict resolution training. Three courts were renovated with OTI’s support so practices and tournaments could be held in nonpolitical spaces.

The open environment of the weekly practices led to new friendships among players from different sectarian backgrounds, as they realized that they shared common problems. One youth, Rana Eid, said, “We played a lot of basketball and we had fun....we learned that there is no difference between us.”

Initially, teams were formed with players from the same neighborhood. The players learned team-building techniques and competed against teams from other neighborhoods. GAM3 then held an intensive two-day camp where players were mixed to allow them to hone their team-building, communication, and conflict resolution skills. GAM3 also developed an on-court technique to emphasize conflict mitigation, calling time-outs to give participants an opportunity to assess how the mixed teams were playing together.

At tournaments organized by GAM3, the mixed teams played against each other peacefully. The tournaments drew large crowds of young people and other spectators, included DJs and dancing, and were characterized by a high level of sportsmanship, a stark contrast to the politicized nature of most sports activities in Lebanon.

The players on these mixed teams are demonstrating their potential to act as peace builders in their communities, and through regular practices, GAM3 is engaging more young people in its games. In addition, significant media coverage has helped attract additional players to the program, which bodes well for GAM3’s 2010 season.