



## Public Policy Review

By Sharon Megdal

### Organizing International Workshop Provides Much Behind-the-Scenes Learning



In keeping with the featured theme of the current newsletter, which is the Arizona, Israeli, and Palestinian Water Management and Policy Workshop, my column, usually devoted to water policy matters, will instead discuss some of the lessons learned organizing the event. The broad significance of the workshop along with the challenges and details associated with its planning provided fertile grounds for learning.

The value of interdisciplinary teamwork was evident from the outset. A core group of four individuals of varied backgrounds conceptualized the workshop. Only two of us, Robert Varady, Deputy Director of the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy, and I, have water policy/management expertise. Anne Betteridge, Director of the Center of Middle Eastern Studies, and Ed Wright, Director of the Arizona Center for Judaic Studies, are experts in other fields. We worked consistently over a lengthy period to develop a broad but balanced program, our varied perspectives and backgrounds ensuring a program of diverse perspectives.

Not to be overlooked are others who contributed significantly to our planning process, including Chet Phillips, graduate research assistant at the Water Resources Research Center. Multiple perspectives and backgrounds at the early planning stages were essential to program development, including consideration of cultural differences.

Another lesson learned was the value of seed funding and the necessity for taking some risk. When our initial request for outside funding was unsuccessful, we confronted the dilemma of lacking financial backing but receiving enthusiastic response to the initial invitations to participate. Significant thought went into the selection of workshop dates and the location. We were concerned if we abandoned our plans or moved the workshop to a different date, we would lose momentum. In the absence of other funding, WRRC committed Technology Research Initiative Funds to secure the hotel site. (The WRRC is a participant in the TRIF-funded University of Arizona Water Sustainability Program, administered by the Arizona Board of Regents. Arizona voters approved TRIF funding in 2000, with funds derived from an increase in the state sales tax to support education.)

Our persistence in seeking financial backing resulted in obtaining grants from the UA Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Israeli-Binational Science Foundation and others. We were heartened by these successes that validated our view that the workshop would be timely and with significant value. Our decision to move forward despite lack of firm outside funding also was validated, although it involved some risk.

Another risk had to do with planning to hold the workshop in Tucson, rather than in the Middle East. We were asking approximately two thirds of the attendees to travel to Tucson rather than one third traveling to the Middle East. Logistics, however, required

we hold a UA-sponsored workshop in Tucson. We could not have overseen the detailed development and delivery of the workshop otherwise. More importantly, the UA serving as a neutral host was a benefit recognized by the participants.

Two main purposes guided the workshop: (1) to identify pressing water issues related to long-term water sustainability through educational presentations and facilitated dialogue among participants; and (2) to develop a targeted, international collaborative research program that addresses research gaps and opportunities. We limited the workshop to invited participants to better achieve the goal of identifying research projects. This approach, however, did not preclude inviting the public to a special evening event. Attracting over 200 people, this no-cost event enabled interested members of the public to hear Israeli and Palestinian officials discuss pertinent water issues and to ask questions.

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Unable to attend the public event due to obligations at home, Dr. Shaddad Attili, Chairman of the Palestinian Water Authority, one of our two keynote speakers, offered to send video-recorded comments and a staff person to participate in the discussion. The public therefore was able to benefit from the perspectives of Professor Uri Shani, director general of the Israeli Water Authority, as well as those from the PWA, via DVD, thus fulfilling our plans and expectations for the public event. Lesson learned: Commitment to finding solutions coupled with flexibility enabled us to deliver an informative public event.

An important feature of our workshop was the participation of young scholars, including undergraduate and graduate students. Students participating in the second full day of the workshop contributed significantly to the discussions and no doubt benefitted from them. The workshop is the first step in the development of a research and science diplomacy program to undertake collaborative research projects addressing critical water management needs of communities in each region. These young scholars demonstrated their interest in participating in future projects.

The workshop succeeded in furthering cross-cultural understanding of local and regional water needs. Further, it began to establish the trust essential to collaborative research projects and proposals and encouraged the recognition of shared goals. In addition to the development of several joint project proposals, an edited volume with papers from the workshop is planned.

My final lesson to share: Although considerable work over a long period of time went into developing and delivering the workshop, the real work truly has just begun. 🏗️