



DREAMERS WITHOUT BORDERS

Despite its small size, Austria is committed to supporting science in countries such as Palestine and Burkina Faso.

 by Sean Treacy

In the Palestinian territories, where instability is normal and mobility is limited, it is difficult to become a scientist. And when researchers and policymakers decided they wanted to help solve that problem by improving graduate education programmes there, at schools such as Birzeit University in the West Bank, they needed an EU-based programme coordinator. So they turned to Austria.

Starting about a decade ago, The Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) administered the finances and legal details of the initiative, called Capacity Building in Social Science Methodologies for Palestine, for years. Now Birzeit University and other institutes in Palestine have graduate programmes that are compatible with European Union universities.

This is just one example of how Austria has come to be an ally of some of the most distressed countries in the developing world, helping them join the global endeavour to provide science for a sustainable future.

Harald Mahrer, state secretary of Austria's Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy, detailed his country's work during TWAS's 26th General Meeting in Vienna. He listed examples, such as grants that support postdoctoral students from the South, research partnerships, and The Austrian Partnership Programme in Higher Education & Research

for Development (APPEAR), which funds partnerships between Austria and developing countries to address issues such as water supply, rural development and energy.

"I am convinced that science is an essential tool for understanding and consequently tackling global challenges," said Mahrer.

LASTING GOOD WILL

At the core of modern science in Austria and its global relationships is the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW), with a history stretching back to its predecessor, the Imperial Academy of Sciences in Vienna, in 1847. It endured decades of tumultuous European history and was reborn as ÖAW in 1921; it was energised in the late 1960s by an opportunity to mediate the politics of science on both sides of the Iron Curtain, because Austria belonged to neither NATO nor the Soviet bloc.

Austria is now in a special position among European nations because it's a small country and historically its colonialist inclinations never extended beyond Europe, making it easier for developing countries to trust. Austrian science's global reach is particularly present in the Arab Region, said 2015 TWAS Fellow Andre Gingrich of Austria, the director of ÖAW's Institute for Social Anthropology, partly because Austria has a long history with Islam through trade and diplomacy.

The work between Austria and Palestine set a framework that helps Birzeit University train Palestinian scientists in research despite Palestine's unstable situation and complex place in the world, Gingrich said. "We used French- and Arabic-speaking researchers in Vienna, some with legal skills, and did sojourns to the Middle East," he explained. "It creates a lot of goodwill."

Four master's students from Birzeit have come to Austria to do graduate-level work in 2009. One of them, social anthropologist Noura Kamal, finished a PhD about her home city of Nablus, Palestine, while it was under occupation in 2015.

While under siege, people in Nablus couldn't leave their homes except for short periods. Children couldn't even go to school. Her research, through observation and interviews, gathered information on how people worked

▼ From top: Andreas Obrecht, Andre Gingrich





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around the siege to live their daily lives, even though the streets were full of soldiers. She found that they were steadfastly determined to advance their lives despite the situation, tapping into family networks that sometimes go back 4,000 years for support. People would get around curfews by gathering at teachers’ homes in their respective neighbourhoods to educate their children.

The opportunity to develop her research about Palestine with a PhD in Austria was valuable, she said, because research is a struggle in

▲ Students from Burkina Faso and Austria look for fish samples using a high-tech fishing device in a project supported by the Austrian Partnership Programme in Higher Education & Research for Development. [Photo: Andreas Melcher]

Palestine. “Palestinians don’t control the borders,” she said. “So it’s really hard to have this kind of exchange and communication with scholars from different parts of the world.” But she hopes to teach and start projects in her homeland someday and motivate Palestinian students to pursue research. Their dreams, after all, have no borders.

SCIENCE THAT BRINGS WORLDS TOGETHER

Sub-Saharan Africa is another area of focus for Austria. APPEAR provides much of Austria’s assistance to the development of research skills in Africa, with projects in fields ranging from agriculture to improving higher education.

“We see it more as a long-term sharing of knowledge and experiences with other worlds, to explore and generate new ideas and hopefully new ways and approaches to do science and research,” said Andreas Obrecht, APPEAR’s programme head.

Obrecht cited several successful programmes. One collaboration in sociology between Austria, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Uganda provided social work education; PhD students from Africa came to Austria and went back with PhDs. Those African researchers then support very poor people in small African villages. Another project helped researchers in Burkina Faso learn how to monitor, assess and manage fisheries that had sprung up around reservoirs built in the 1950s.

Two-thirds of APPEAR’s projects are in sub-Saharan Africa, but it works in other regions, too. It’s supporting hydropower in Nepal by building a curriculum at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu for hydropower management. Back in Palestine, in the Gaza Strip, they’re supporting an on-going project to share knowledge about energy-efficient architecture and home construction.

The key, Obrecht said, is breaking down the educational wall between North and South. And it’s especially important now as Europe is confronting an historic influx of refugees, forcing European leaders to confront economic and social inequalities in the world.

Explained Obrecht: “We see ourselves as a culturally open-minded agency, to get these worlds together.” ■