**DREAMERS WITHOUT BORDERS**

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

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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...
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)