

## NURTURING LEADERS IN PEACEBUILDING AND COEXISTENCE: THE CASE OF THE ARAVA INSTITUTE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

Asaf Zohar, Stuart Schoenfeld, Ilan Alleson

*Abstract: A recent issue of the Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture (2006) examines the perceived failure of the “people-to-people” initiatives of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In contrast to the extended discussion of “what went wrong?” a short piece in the issue by Cohen (2006) about the Arava Institute of Environmental Studies is unusually positive. This contrast is not unique to this special issue of the Palestine Israel Journal. As well as accounts of how efforts to bring Palestinians and Israelis into productive contact failed, there are also accounts of successful efforts to build personal relationships, and enduring organizations continue to bring together Palestinians and Israelis. This paper examines the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, focusing on organizational survival and organizational strategies for transforming their societal environments. The paper will argue that by developing a continuing resource base and a distinct organizational culture, the Arava Institute is able to act as a protective buffer in a politically problematic environment. It seeks to transform its surrounding society by aligning its organizational culture with the life plans of the students who participate in its work, by building both bridging and bonding social capital and using this social capital to create new local and global networks. The analysis highlights the ability of the organization to cultivate a culture of organizational learning, so that it is able to adapt to its changing context while at the same time remaining true to its core mandate. Since not all efforts to institutionalize contacts have lasted, the example of the Arava Institute is used to identify specific organizational characteristics associated with its survival and continuing pursuit of the dual mandate of environmentalism and peacebuilding.*

A recent issue of the *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture* (2006) (PIJ) examines the perceived failure of the “people-to-people” initiatives of the late 1990s and early 2000s. These were attempts to (as was the then current phrase) “deepen the peace” by bringing together Palestinians and Israelis to encounter and learn to understand each other. The editors of this issue of PIJ write in their introduction, “The contact between Palestinians and Israelis appeared to fail to produce any meaningful influence on the attitudes of the participants within and beyond the time frame of the meetings” (Perlman and Nasser-Najjab: 6). In contrast to the extended discussion of “what went wrong?” a short piece in the issue by Cohen (2006) about the Arava Institute of Environmental Studies is, in contrast, positive. Cohen is not alone in finding positive experiences to report. Others have written of both failures and successes (Abu-Nimer, 1999, 2004; Baskin and al Qaq, 1999; Chaitin et al., 2002, 2004; Kelman, 1998; Maddy-Weitzman, 2005, 2006, 2007; Maoz, 2003, 2004; Plonski, 2005; Rouhana and Kelman, 1994; Suleiman, 2004; van Woerkom, 2004; Wallach, 2002; Zwirn, 2001). Herzog and Hai (2005: 35) note that despite the ending of many person-to-person initiatives, those that continue are “characterized by more professionalism and improved methodology.”

In this paper, we contrast the perception of failure with the reports of success through a case study of the example that Cohen gives, the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies. The paper pays particular attention to organizational-level analysis, asking about organizational survival in

turbulent situations and organizational strategies for transforming their societal environments. The paper will argue that by developing a continuing resource base and a distinct organizational culture, the Arava Institute is able to act as a protective buffer in a politically problematic environment. It seeks to transform its surrounding society by aligning its organizational culture with the life plans of the students who participate in its work, by building both bridging and bonding social capital and using this social capital to create new local and global networks. The analysis highlights the ability of the organization to cultivate a culture of organizational learning, so that it is able to adapt to its changing context while at the same time remaining true to its core mandate.

## THE PERCEPTION OF FAILURE

The general perception of People-to-People programs in the special issue of the *Palestine Israel Journal* is one of failure. Herzog and Hai write that despite about 500 P2P “projects” involving over 100 organizations, and tens of thousands of Israelis and Palestinians from 1993 to 2000, with an estimated cost of US\$20-30 million, these activities “were a fraction of what needed to happen if the reality of conflict and relations between the two societies were to be substantially changed” (2006:15). Tamari writes critically that in contrast to pre-Oslo left wing Israeli-Palestinian efforts to create common solidarity, P2P projects were “feel-good” enterprises taking advantage of foreign donor funding, accompanied by “thick volumes of unreadable research” funded within narrow parameters (2006:16-18). Liel, who, as the director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry was responsible for working with the Norwegian P2P programs, writes of knowing, despite well document reports of activities, that by March 2001, during the second intifada, “Most of the projects had to be canceled, or had become completely meaningless...” (2006:19). Nasser-Najjab reports that many Palestinians involved in P2P activities came to “the view that joint projects conducted and processed in the post-Oslo period were negative and a failure” (2006:30). Israeli participants were “dissatisfied” with the political focus of Palestinian participants and critical of their “passivity in initiating personal contacts” with Israelis (2006: 30, 31). Pundak writes that “diplomats and politicians ... used the P2P element as instruments in the arsenal aimed at harming and weakening the other side” (2006:38). Hanssen-Bauer, director of the Norwegian P2P program from 1996-2003, writes that by the second intifada, “People-to-People activities became almost impossible to carry out. Many peace activists on both sides turned away, sad and disappointed by their former friends on the other side.” (2006:45)

## THINKING ABOUT FUTURE INITIATIVES BY ASKING WHAT WENT WRONG

Despite the perception of failure, the contributors to the PIJ shared the view that “there is still a meaningful role for People-to-People to address the current situation” and wrote about why P2P failed with the intention of “fixing” it (7).

The most common explanation of the failure of P2P given in the special issue of PIJ is the loss of support from political leadership on both sides. Programs to bring Palestinians and Israelis together went ahead despite the lack of political support, but contentious relations between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority were often mirrored inside P2P groups. Palestinians wanted to talk about the occupation, particularly continuing expansion of Israeli settlements, and were offended by the defensiveness of Israeli participants. Israeli participants,

for their part, wanted to talk about security and terrorism. Both were disappointed. Contributors to the PIJ special issue also commented that reliance on foreign donors drove program design, gave priority to writing reports of “success” in order to justify continued funding, and encouraged opportunistic behavior (Liel, 2006; Tamari, 2006; Nasser-Najjab, 2006).

A separate evaluation by Herzog and Hai (2005) adds to this list of problems – short term funding, ineffective use of funds, different perceptions inside and outside the programs, unrealistic expectations, technical problems, competition for funds and the difficult debate over whether Palestinian cooperation in People to People programs constituted “normalization.” However, the strongest theme that appears throughout the study is the same as those of the PIJ special issue – the lack of a “legitimation strategy.” Neither the Israeli government nor the Palestinian Authority gave people to people programs the political support they needed to be models of transformed relationships between Palestinians and Israelis. Nor did the international funders have a strategic vision of how the limited funds they committed were to have a major social impact in the face of widespread skepticism and official indifference or hostility. Herzog and Hai, like most of the contributors to the special issue of the Palestine Israel Journal, continue to support the People to People initiative “as an important vehicle for reframing discourse and challenging existing perceptions” (Herzog and Hai, 2005; 42). They recommend much more adequately funded future people to people activities, supported by “a multi-pronged legitimization effort” (Herzog and Hai, 2005; 41) and an “inter-sectoral dialogue” of activists and funders (43). This evaluation echoes similar points made by Baskin and Al-Qaq (2004).

#### THE PERCEPTION OF SUCCESS: THINKING ABOUT FUTURE INITIATIVES BY ASKING WHAT’S GONE RIGHT

Evaluations of P2P depend to some extent on how P2P is defined. Herzog and Hai are inclusive, defining P2P as “any and all post-Oslo ... Israeli-Palestinian civil society cooperation and dialogue efforts that were not primarily business (for-profit) or humanitarian (aid) in nature.” (12) Others writing in the PIJ seem to be thinking primarily or entirely of the “official” P2P programs under Norwegian sponsorship.

Particularly critical to the examination of P2P impact is the question of whether to study organizations. A small group of organizations promoting intergroup reconciliation was in existence before the Oslo period. Others came into existence during the period of the People to People initiative, and some even survived its collapse. New ones have since been established. Consequently, examining how organizations promoting cooperation and dialogue survived the failure of the “Oslo process” and how new ones established themselves should be useful to those hoping for another opportunity to promote cooperative, positive contacts. This approach suggests research that focuses on organizations as tools for societal transformation (Morgan, 2006) as well as on the internal dynamics of the programs. While this topic has received extensive attention (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008), relatively little consideration has been given to organization-level analyses of impacts on P2P initiatives. Maoz, for example, examined characteristics of six peacebuilding organizations and projects that continued to function after the September 2000 surge in political tension and increase in violence. She concluded that the outstanding characteristic they share is “the high degree of equality and symmetry between Israeli-Jews and Palestinians.” They have co-directors with

equal authority over decision-making; they have locations on the West Bank in addition to, or instead of, Israel. They use English, as a neutral language. (2004: 569) Another organizational model, however, is suggested by the studies of the Seeds of Peace summer camp (Wallach, 2002; Maddy-Weitzman, 2005; van Woerkom, 2004). These studies comment on the powerful transformative experience of the participants, the commitment of its American sponsors and leaders, and the benefits it offers to the adversarial parties.<sup>1</sup>

The organizational strategy of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies is different from that of the organizations described by Maoz and from that of the Seeds of Peace, providing the basis for a third organizational model of successful P2P work. The following case study looks first at organizational characteristics which help this self-conscious change agent to survive and work towards its goals. Second, it examines the ability of the organization to cultivate a culture of organizational learning, so that it is able to adapt to its changing context while at the same time remaining true to its core mandate. We present the Arava Institute as an example, not as the exemplar. The intent of the paper is to further contribute organizational level analysis useful to those designing future people to people work.<sup>2</sup>

## ORGANIZATIONS AS INSTRUMENTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

In contexts where a deteriorating political atmosphere makes people to people activities more difficult, organizational culture can act as a buffer, supporting shared intergroup values and behavioral expectations (Wilkins, and Ouchi, 1983). A continuing organization can be a source of social capital (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998), providing routine routes through social networks in order to access the financial, personnel and expert resources that people to people activities need to be successful. Continuing organizations, particularly those that are well networked, are resources to participants as they negotiate life plans incorporating the values they share with the organization. The following section describes this combination of organizational culture, social capital and the alignment of organizational and individual values as it is found in the Arava Institute.

**Organizational Culture as a protective buffer.** Organizations can act as buffers to a negative political atmosphere. Organizations create their own cultures. Frameworks of shared meaning give participants an alternative set of values and an alternative way of interpreting events. These shared alternative values and interpretive frameworks help individuals to withstand the pressure to reject reaching out to adversaries. Cultures also have shared behavioral expectations. Behavioral expectations communicate the kinds of acts that are destructive of social relationships and thereby set limits. Where these expectations are based on mutual respect (rather than suppression of what is authoritatively considered “incorrect”), they train people in the skills of getting along. Finally, continuing organizations as cultures of shared values and mutual respect

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<sup>1</sup> More recent research (Hammack, 2006; Posner, 2006), while noting the success of Seeds of Peace in maintaining its activities, have raised questions about effectiveness.

<sup>2</sup> The authors all have connections of one kind or another to the Arava Institute. Alleson is a former student at the Arava Institute, Schoenfeld has participated in research in which the institute is a partner and is on the board of FAI; Zohar has taught at the institute and acted as an organizational consultant.

are continuing settings where these values and behaviors are continually modeled and not just promoted.<sup>3</sup>

Organizations can also act as buffers when they adopt the outlook and structure of social movement organizations. Social movements are self-consciously, and by most definitions, oppositional and committed to societal change. They use rhetoric of struggle to define their relationship to the established social order. In order to maintain the struggle, social movement organizations have developed ways of recruiting and retaining members through an explicit organizational self-understanding as new ways being born. They have developed organizational tactics to extract the resources they need to survive and continue their work.

The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies opened in 1996, in the period that people to people programs were being established. Located on a kibbutz near the Jordanian and Egyptian borders, it was intended to be a regional center of environmental teaching and research, recruiting a mixed student body. In that sense, it was like People to People programs. However, while the organizational culture developed at the Arava Institute draws on the shared meaning of People to People programs, it draws on other systems of meaning as well. The Arava Institute is a residential university program. Conventional understandings of university education and what life is like on a residential campus are a strong source of shared meanings and behavioral expectations at the institute. People relate to each other through the roles of student, staff and faculty, and have conventional behavioral expectations about those roles. The institute's culture also draws strongly on the understandings and behavioral norms which are shared among environmentalists. The culture of the kibbutz on which the institute is located also affects the institute's culture.

The institute has been self-conscious about having a clear "vision statement," which reads, "The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies will provide the Middle East a new generation of sophisticated professionals that will meet the region's environmental challenges with richer and more innovative, peace-building solutions." The associated "mission statement" continues, "Our mission is to create a world-class environmental teaching and research institute at Kibbutz Ketura, which will:

- Deliver teaching at the highest quality and level.
- Play a leading role in research, conservation, environmental protection and sustainable development.
- Prepare future Arab and Jewish leaders to cooperatively solve the region's environmental challenges.
- Teach future leaders from all over the world that nature knows no borders."

Participation in the Arava Institute organizational culture is an immersion experience. The institute is residential. Students stay for a semester (4 months) or a full academic year (8 months). Some stay longer as interns in various capacities. Enrolment has ranged from a low of 15 to a high of 40. About 1/3 are Jewish Israeli, 1/3 Arab and Arab Israeli and 1/3 foreign, almost all from North America. Students with different backgrounds share accommodations,

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<sup>3</sup> On organizational culture, see Scott and Davis, 2007:212-4; on the ways in which organizations manage their relationships with their environments, see Scott and Davis, 2007:220-309.

take classes together, and are together in their spare time. Cohen (2006:53) writes that this immersion experience in a supportive organizational culture enables participants to forge relationships based on trust, which is vital to honestly tackle the painful realities of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

A few years after opening, the institute created the Peace building and Environmental Leadership Seminar (PELS) as a required (but non-credit) part of its program. The institute website describes the seminar as “a forum for investigating aspects of the social and political context in which environmental problems develop, and for ‘prefiguring’ the kinds of relationships necessary to foster a more just, peaceful, and ecologically secure future.” The seminar includes discussions, workshops, guest lectures and field trips and is facilitated by “a Jewish-Arab team experienced with intra-group dialogue.” (Arava Institute, 2007). The similarity of PELS to “people to people” programs is readily apparent, as are its differences. PELS takes place over several months, among people who are living together. PELS is part of the process of opening up to each other; but it is only a part. Its sessions are explicitly set up as places where conversations start, but where they are not concluded.

The role of North American students in the culture of the institute has been significant. They come as exchange students, receiving credit at their home universities. Since the language of instruction at the institute is English – the neutral language of the region, particularly in higher education – they do not face a linguistic barrier to study abroad. Most North American students are Jewish. Some are the children of Israelis who live in North America. Their presence signifies that study at the institute is a choice made by students who have other options and who expect academic quality. The North American students are also typically from that segment of society that is convinced of the seriousness of the environmental crisis and pushing for a response. In these ways, the North American students contribute to the culture of institute as a serious place where socially meaningful work is done. Like most Israeli students at the institute, they also come from the segment of society which advocates an Israeli future based on mutual accommodation with Palestinians, the Israeli Arab minority and surrounding countries. In this way the North American students present to the Palestinians, Jordanians and Arab Israelis at the institute North American attitudes, and specifically North American Jewish attitudes, which differ from those commonly perceived.

The institute’s organizational culture promotes an environmentalist perspective on the region. The institute provides a space where aspects of regional environmental issues that are marginalized by nationalist discourses can be acknowledged. In the region rising numbers of people and rising expectations for standard of living collide with depleted and degraded natural resources, widely differential access to natural resources, woefully inadequate conceptions of ecological responsibility, and potentially devastating local effects of global climate change. The institute is a place where this collision can be acknowledged and the response of informed social mobilization can be fostered. The institute has positioned itself outside of the discourses of “security” and “steadfast opposition,” cultivating, instead, an emergent narrative of regional identity based on a common ecology.

Part of the institute’s environmentalist culture is its approval of grassroots activism and advocacy. The AIES study body joined national demonstrations against the trans-Israel highway

and the expansion of Israel's southern airport into the ecologically sensitive Ein Evrona reserve. Students collaborated on *The First Middle Eastern Bunker Rehabilitation Project*, which involved bringing participants from Israel, the PA and Jordan together to work with AIES participants to transform an old military bunker located on Ketura into an environmental communications office. AIES students leveraged their distinct social networks to promote the event in Palestinian, Israeli and Jordanian institutions, conducting outreach, organizing the logistics, and developing press releases. AIES students were also involved in planning, promoting and holding *The First Middle Eastern Conference on Sustainable Transportation*. Since 2002 *Sababa*, the Center for a Healthy Environment in the Arava, has been housed at the institute. Focusing on the region in which the institute is located, *Sababa* has addressed regional planning, conservation of open areas and recycling. The institute advocated for easing restrictions on Palestinians who apply to study in Israel, a position consistent with both its mandate and its interests. After the beginning of the Second Intifada, Palestinian applicants could not get residence permits, and the institute had to draw its Arab students from Palestinians in Jerusalem with Israeli residence, Israeli Arabs and Jordanians. The institute joined GISHA, the Centre for the Legal Protection for the Freedom of Movement, in its successful petition to the Israeli Supreme Court against the Israeli Defense Force's sweeping ban preventing Palestinians from studying in Israel.

Reinforcement of the organizational culture continues after students leave. The institute is sending alumni out into the world to be change agents. The alumni coordinator, a senior staff position, assists with professional development, circulates employment opportunities and information about graduate programs and networks students from different years who have similar interests. The alumni division maintains active Yahoo and Facebook "groups." This networking with alumni was supplemented in 2005 with the first conference of the "Arava Peace and Environment Network," which met in Aqaba. At the 2006 APEN meeting, control was passed to an alumni steering committee.

**Alignment of organizational culture and individual life plans and the importance of social capital.** An organization that has an agenda of social transformation will be concerned with the alignment of its values and behavioral expectations with the lives of its participants. Literature on intergroup contacts has been critical of "inoculation" perspectives on change – the approach that one powerful experience, perhaps with "booster shots" later, will change people sufficiently to turn them into autonomous change agents. Rather, an organization with an agenda of social transformation can recruit those whose values are congruent with the organization's, work to show participants how living by these values can be part of an unfolding life-plan, facilitate life choices which allow living by these shared values, and be a continuing resource to individuals whose life-goals are congruent with the organization.

The concepts of "bonding" and "bridging" social capital capture the change oriented organization as a buffer insulating an alternative culture, a hub in supportive personal and inter-organizational networks and a practical resource for those with congruent values. As developed by Bourdieu and Coleman, social capital is understood as an attribute of relationships. As they see it, "to possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage" (Portes, 1998:7). Putnam, among others, argues that for the connections between individuals and networks to have value, the

connections must be frameworks for reciprocity and trust (2000). Putnam further distinguishes two forms of social capital: bridging (or inclusive) and bonding (or exclusive) (2000:19). Bonding forms suggest an inward focus, typically implying a homogenous composition of participants nested within particular social networks (Putnam, 2000:22). Bridging social capital implies connections and social relations among diverse individuals that transcend ethnic, class, gender, sexuality, religion or other lines. Whereas bridging social capital can generate new and broader identities, bonding reinforces membership in more homogenous groupings (Putnam, 2000:23). Bonding produces solidarity and trust. Bridging gives network participants access to a wide range of resources.

The Arava Institute has developed a set of practices based on both bonding and bridging. During the four or eight months at the institute, many students bond – with each other, with faculty and staff, with the ideals of the institution. With these bonds, they have acquired resources they can use – friends to stay with when traveling; potential colleagues for future projects; contacts when they are investigating educational and career opportunities; faculty, staff and peers to go to for references; people they have learned how to talk to and can trust when they need to talk about the Middle East.

This bonding is also a strategy for bridging. Arava students are not a homogeneous group. They come from, and go back to, very different places. Many go back having learned things that most people in their groups have not had the opportunity to know. The time at the institute can be something of a liminal experience, where a person leaves a social status, goes through an intense experience, and is then returned, the same person but changed. Interviews and informal discussions with alumni indicate that this is fitting for the stage of life and the kinds of people who choose to come to the institute. They are personally in a process of change, aware of being members of societies in a process of change.

From the perspective of faculty and staff, their role is also both bonding and bridging. Classes are small; teaching is personal. Almost all staff and a few faculty members live on the kibbutz and are part of the out of class social world of institute students. Staff and faculty go on recruitment trips, conduct interviews with applicants, expose students through course work to a range of possible career options, steer students towards further study or specific work, write letters of reference, and otherwise through their research and public policy involvements cultivate personal and institutional connections which can help students achieve their own goals and the social transformational goals of the institute.

As an academic institution the Arava Institute has formal relationships with other academic institutions. Academic credits were initially granted through a relationship with Tel Aviv University. The institute has now established a relationship with Ben Gurion University. The institute and Ben Gurion University established a joint Master's program and closer cooperation appears to be developing. The institute has also established an exchange program with the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University in Toronto, which brings former Arava students to York for graduate studies.

The research agenda of the institute and its ties to local environmental advocacy are other forms of bridging. The director of research, like the alumni coordinator, is a key staff position. The

institute participates in projects as partners with Palestinian and Jordanian researchers and research organizations. These projects include developing policy options for the Dead Sea, transboundary stream restoration, and a study of health effects from exposure to airborne particles. These projects involve links to international networks of research funding, and have brought regional conferences to the institute on a regular basis. While the institute was not begun with a strong technological orientation, a link to that sector may be developing with the institute's co-sponsorship of a conference on alternative energy and the proposal for a solar power research center associated with the institute.

The institute has strengthened its social capital by developing the Friends of the Arava Institute. Friends of the Arava Institute is a fundraising initiative, registered as a charity in the United States. In developing this initiative, FAI has created a board whose members bring institutional contacts and legitimacy as well as fundraising opportunities. Materials produced and circulated by FAI also promote the public profile of the institute.

Another form of bridging is in the relationship of the institute to kibbutz. The institute is a separate legal entity from the kibbutz. Through its development the institute has had a major impact on the kibbutz, as a tenant on a significant part of its landscape, as a source of employment, as a socially valuable initiative that the kibbutz can support. The issue of complementary development of the kibbutz and the institute is an important and intimate one for both parties.

In this view of organizations as hubs in a network of organizations and individuals, bridging takes place at many levels. The challenge for the organization is to deal with external input at many different levels, to look for opportunities and to fashion an internal culture which is both coherent and adaptive to external changes. How in turbulent environments do organizations maintain coherence in the face of much input at different places? This question is linked to the recent literature on learning organizations.

## ORGANIZATION LEARNING AT AIES: SURVIVING AND THRIVING THROUGH CHANGE

Only some organizations founded to promote people to people activities survived. Literature on learning organizations suggests that the reasons for the survival of some over others can be linked to their capacity to promote both individual learning and organization-wide processes. Cook and Yanow (1993) characterize theories of organizational learning as either focusing on learning by individuals in organizational contexts, or on individual learning as a model for organizational action. Organizations are founded with strategies responsive to specific historical moments. Changes in the context in which organizations work introduce stress at different points in the organization, including pressures to alter core strategies, recruitment and retention of staff, recruitment and retention of participants, financial resources, rejection of what the organization is producing. These strains can make an organization ineffective and unsustainable, especially if it is unable to address these challenges through successful learning processes (Chiva and Alegre, 2005).

Collective learning processes in organizations play a critical role in promoting adaptation and strategic renewal under conditions of uncertainty, turbulence and change (Senge, 1990; Senge et al, 1994, 1999; Wenger, 1998; Dooley and Van de Ven, 1999, Frank and Fahrbach, 1999; Lewis, 2000). Organization theorists have developed many conceptual formulations of organizational-level learning that attempt to capture the nature and significance of these processes of individual and collective learning, and the critical role they play in sustaining organizational adaptation and creative regeneration (Cameron, and Quinn, 1999; Dixon, 2000). Senge (1990: 3), describes such 'learning organizations' as: "...organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together."

According to Senge, organizations that engage in collective learning leverage these learning competencies when faced with rapid and unpredictable changes to their environment. Such learning organizations are able to 'discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels' (ibid.: 4), and direct this ability towards both successful organizational adaptation as well as ongoing organizational renewal and revitalization: "for a learning organization, 'adaptive learning' must be joined by 'generative learning,' learning that enhances our capacity to create' (Senge 1990:14).

Learning organizations create a context that promotes individual and collective learning as a core characteristic of their shared identity. A key dimension that distinguishes learning organizations is their ability to create shared norms, beliefs, and values that promote learning processes across all organizational activities. Since organizational culture is commonly characterized by shared norms, beliefs, and values (Smircich, 1993), it is apparent that collective learning processes can often become a key component of an organization's cultural identity. Studies of the relationship between culture and organizational learning processes highlight the iterative relationship between these constructs (Dixon, 1994; 2000; Cook and Yanow, 1993). These studies offer insights on how learning processes can become embedded in an organization's culture, manifested in common behaviors, values, systems of shared meaning, as well as other artifacts among organizational members (Schein, 1996; 1999). In other words, the culture of an organization provides a critical context in which collective learning processes occur. Organizational learning, therefore, can be understood as a collective activity that jointly acts as an activity of organization-level cultural preservation, as well as one of cultural innovation and regeneration (Yanow, 2000). This perspective on the role and nature of organization and individual learning that unfolds in the context of distinctive cultures suggests a fundamental paradox: namely, that cultures that promote organizational learning can simultaneously preserve and precipitate fundamental change in the cultural status quo.

Dixon's (1994; 2000) model of collective learning is also noteworthy in this regard, highlighting how organization-level learning is inextricably related to individual learning. Dixon separates the individual level cycle of experiential learning from the organization-level of learning and describes distinctive requirements for learning at these different levels. According to Dixon, both levels of learning, individual and collective, need to occur at the same time for successful organizational learning.

Dixon proposes a four-step cycle of collective learning: widespread information generation, integration of new information, collective interpretation, and ongoing revitalization of organizational strategies and practices. In the first stage, information is widely collected and shared by all organizational members. In addition to searching for information about internal organizational strengths, weaknesses, this process also involves the continuous collection of information from multiple stakeholders and external sources. In the next two stages, information is widely distributed and critically evaluated among organizational members. Organizational members engage in open discussions through frequent interaction across organizational roles and functions. Discussions are grounded in a culture that is based on egalitarian values, especially of respect, equality and freedom to speak openly without fear of punishment or coercion. The final stage culminates with the translation of the learning process into actions, contributing to the ongoing revitalization of organizational strategies and practices.

We attribute the endurance and expansion of the Arava Institute, situated within the collapse of the Oslo accords alongside an increasingly fragile peace-NGO community, in part, to its particular organizational learning approach. Following Dixon, AIES's strategy can be appreciated through a 4-stage cyclical model.

### **Stage1: Widespread Information Generation**

AIES at any given time is managing and participating in a number of distinct yet interrelated organizational activities. As an accredited post-secondary institution, it organizes and delivers an academic program to a diverse group of primarily undergraduate students. Each semester brings new students from Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and elsewhere to engage in collective and individual learning processes. The academic program remains the core organizational activity for AIES, and critical attention of faculty and staff is given to monitoring and assessing student learning. Information is collected through traditional course evaluations, while small class sizes (up to 20 students) allow for group projects, role-playing simulations, and close interpersonal contact between students, program associates, faculty, and Arava staff. This relatively intense level of organizational monitoring and assessment of the direction and quality of student learning generates multiple informal conversations and formal discussions. The exceptionally intense PELS sessions are also a form of information gathering. Their dynamics provide insights to the staff about the issues and emotions each group of students is bringing in from their home environments. It also communicates to the students that the institute is committed to their learning by learning about each other and that the institute cares about the collective journey of each cohort as its experience becomes part of institutional memory.

AIES' ongoing contact with its alumni offers another illustration of the importance of information gathering at the Institute. Alumni engagement represents a central organizational activity at AIES, and is undertaken through both formal and informal channels. The Institute's stated focus is on education, environment, and co-existence. Since the intention is to achieve these changes one student at a time, ongoing contact with alumni represents a significant objective that bears directly upon AIES core mission. Contact with alumni extends well beyond public relations and fund-raising issues. It provides the Institute with important information that plays a role in identifying the degree of impact they are having on environment and co-existence issues *through* their former students. Information about the activities and experiences of alumni

are widely shared among faculty and staff, and stories of alumni activities relating to peacebuilding and regional environmental matters are part of the culture of conversation of AIES. Stories of alumni activities are often shared with current students, adding further layers to the culture of student-centered discourse at the Institute.

Because the institute is also developing as a center for collaborative regional research, it proactively searches for information about potential research and policy work for both faculty and students. Searching for research and policy conference opportunities was not initially part of the institute's activities, but something added a few years after the institute began. More recently, faculty at the Arava have been central in the creation of several international conferences regarding transboundary water systems, and environmental issues surrounding the Dead Sea. Such conferences have brought scholars and environmental practitioners from inside and outside the region, facilitating new research and several publications (e.g., Lipchin et al., 2005).

Activities such as these both contribute new knowledge to ongoing environmental concerns while also demonstrating to students that talk of environmental cooperation is more than theoretical. Students are aware of research projects, and sometimes participate in them. Projects and policy conferences also expose them to regional environmental experts and potential venues for future study and employment.

### **Stage 2: Integrate New/Local Information into Organizational Context**

Frequent information exchanges are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for organization-wide learning processes. Information needs to flow unimpeded within and between organizational members, freely crossing organizational levels and stakeholder groups. In addition, the quality of these conversations is critical; a culture of shared learning needs to offer members 'safe space' for honest and open exchanges, readily incorporating multiple and potentially divergent perspectives on program activities, approaches and strategies.

AIES' small staff plays an important role in shaping the quantity and quality of information that is internalized into the AIES organizational context. While the number of continuing staff and faculty grows each year, the core group consists of a director and six administrators who oversee specific functional areas (e.g., research, accounting, etc.). While specific projects may allow for the hiring of temporary positions, a key role of the core administrative group is to gather and share information on current and potential opportunities that can offer AIES new directions for growth and development.

AIES unique physical and social setting plays an important role in providing multiple opportunities for information exchange and dissemination. As noted earlier, AIES is located on Kibbutz Ketura, and virtually all staff and several faculty members are permanent kibbutz residents. While the line between the workplace and private 'living space' is a complex one in such settings, close physical proximity of organizational members generates multiple opportunities for shared information integration and ongoing discussion both within and outside the workplace. In practice, the interdependence of the Institute with the kibbutz translates into a group of people that work together and live together, including living quarters within close proximity, and a common dining facility that brings people together several times a day outside

of the office. Consequently, the physical setting also provides a context where staff and faculty frequently interact with other internal stakeholders, such as students and program associates.

The physical setting also plays an important role in the quality and quantity of student interactions and information sharing. Students are in a truly unique physical setting for learning: 1-2 semester long courses in an isolated area in the desert of the Southern Arava valley provide a context for ongoing interaction both through a rigorous academic program and close living and housing arrangements. These unique surroundings enable students to deliberate social, political, and environmental ideas on an on-going basis over an extended period of time. Finally, by virtue of the Institute's location on an Israeli Kibbutz, students are embedded in an environment that is more open to regional reconciliation than most Israeli establishments and locations. In this sense, the social setting of the Institute offers an enabling context of 'safe space' for challenging assumptions and ideas about such sensitive issues as regional conflict and culturally embedded stereotypes.

Program associates, consisting entirely of institute alumni, provide staff, faculty and administration with frequent and timely feedback on student perceptions and experiences. The diversity of the student body is also reflected in this group; in a recent semester, the program associates consisted of two Jordanian students, an American, a Canadian, and two Israelis. The diversity of backgrounds leads to a heterogeneity of views on the meaning and significance of shared information and experience. In addition, alumni through their ongoing contact with each other are able to provide the Institute with valuable information on potential opportunities that arise within the international scope of alumni work activities. Staff, alumni, regional supporters and overseas supporters easily share information with each other about opportunities for recruitment, public relations, research and environmental activism.

The Institute's new administrative building serves as a metaphor for the culture of organization-wide information flow and integration at AIES. The building, which also serves as an ecological demonstration building, is designed for easy information flow. Its center is an oval meeting room, surrounded by an oval hallway, with offices on the outer perimeter.

### **Stage 3: Collective Interpretation and Shared Learning**

This stage involves collective, organization-wide interpretation of information. The *process* of information sharing is critical, since meaningful collective reflection and interpretation requires openness to new ideas and often involves the questioning of shared assumptions. The 'safe space' to revisit practices and shared understandings can be created through shared norms and values that promote honest, critical reflection. Effective dialogue (Isaacs, 2001) of this nature is grounded in egalitarian values, especially respect, equality and freedom to speak openly without fear of punishment or coercion. Such cultural attributes give 'permission' for individual members to engage in honest dialogue about organizational challenges, and allow discourse to explore new directions in thinking and action.

Many of the conditions that enable 'safe space' for collective inquiry of this nature have been noted earlier. Organizational norms allow for diversity of individual interpretations of shared experiences. Multiple interpretations and experiences from diverse student body are regularly discussed as part of the learning program. The combination of close living arrangements, small

numbers of students, staff and faculty, and the long-term nature of the program represent some of the enabling conditions for the emergence of a cultural environment in which participants can openly identify shared challenges, construct new group cultural norms, social spaces and joint projects.

#### **Stage 4: Action**

Stage 4 of the organizational learning cycle involves the action phase of ongoing revitalization of organizational strategies and practices. Activities in this phase represent the culmination of earlier phases, often resulting in changes in individual and organizational strategies, practices, or even cultural changes, including shared systems of meaning. At the institutional level, there are multiple examples of ongoing revitalization, ranging from strategic aspects of evolving institutional intent, alignment of emerging competencies with new funding opportunities, and major revisions to program structure and curriculum.

The evolution of the Institute's curriculum illustrates this iterative process, and its strong relationship to culturally embedded processes of individual and collective learning. The Institute's academic program is not limited to formal classes. At the early stages of the Institute's history, learning goals relating to leadership in peacebuilding, while grounded in its mission and vision, were largely unaddressed by the academic program; instead, they were allowed to emerge through informal student experiential learning. The program now includes the unique non-credit Peace Building and Environmental Leadership Seminar (PELS). The purpose of this program is to help students build a basic skill set in required competencies around leadership in coexistence and peacebuilding. Based on student feedback and shared experiences, AIES staff and faculty recognized the need for formal classes addressing this core learning objective. New directions and skill sets were identified and addressed iteratively through time, resulting in the current program, consisting of dialogue sessions, peace building and leadership skills sessions, as well as workshops on specific topics facilitated by guest speakers and students.

Every year, new refinements and additions are introduced, and the impact on student learning is carefully monitored. For example, in the 2006-7 academic year, student-led initiatives relating to environmental justice have been introduced. Direct Action, a successful student-led environmental action and advocacy program, is a new component in the overall program this year.

#### **CONCLUSION: PEACEBUILDING THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING: CULTIVATING A NETWORK AROUND DEVELOPMENT, ECOLOGY AND REGIONAL IDENTITY**

Despite common perceptions of people to people failure, organizations have survived which are continuing the slow work of building a culture of peace. The strategy of the Arava Institute has been to create a university level teaching and research program in the service of both environment and peace. It has developed a distinct organizational culture that aligns the institutional mission of social transformation with the life plans of its students. It has positioned itself in the turbulent politics of the region by being clear about its mandate, cultivating its resource base and acting as a learning organization which promotes internal norms of information generation, integration of new information, shared processes of interpreting new

information and being open to new and revised activities. The institute continues to attract a diverse student body, to engage in research with regional partners and to be actively involved in regional policy discussions.

This account of the institute's survival and strategy is not a full organizational analysis. There are further questions to be asked, particularly about effectiveness. Effectiveness is a large question, since the agenda of societal transformation is a large one. Over 400 students have gone through in the first ten years. Where are they now, what are they doing, to what extent have they continued the networks and the shared culture fostered by the institute? Since the institute is one of a number of organizations that continue to work on an agenda of regional contact and cooperation, what are the challenges and opportunities of the organizational network of which it is a part? On the emergence of the institute's research activities: how has this organizational dimension been coordinated with the institute's mission of peacebuilding? On the goal of promoting regional environmental cooperation: to what extent has the institute become a valued resource to regional policy makers? This question involves not only specifically environmental policy, but also the linkage between environmental policy and economic / development policy. On the recent promotion of large scale technological projects on water and energy: to what extent has the institute been able to promote its mission when asked to coordinate its work with business and political interest groups? Since the regional political leadership has been unable to find a framework for Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation, how can the institute negotiate political space to advance its mission? Finally, as the institute continues to change over time, what are the emerging challenges to survival and effectiveness and how is the institute responding to them?

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