

## THE VILLAGES GROUP



### SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES AND REQUEST FOR SUPPORT

MARCH 2011

#### **Who We Are**

We are a small group of Israeli and Palestinian individuals working in partnership. We have been active since 2002 in two large villages on the eastern outskirts of Nablus (Salem and Deir El Hattab), and in several smaller villages (Susiya, Umm al-Kheir, Umm Faqra, and others) in South Hebron Hills (Massafar Yatta), an area located at the southernmost edge of the West Bank.

At the foundation of our work is the cultivation of personal friendships between Israelis and Palestinians, as a way to counteract the separation policy perpetrated by both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. The main challenge facing Villages Group activists is to seek and diversify options for personal and communal development, against the background of an oppressive occupation regime already lasting nearly two generations. Meeting this challenge involves deep personal and committed relationships, patiently nurtured over time. In these relationships we strive for equality and mutuality, in the midst of a brutal and asymmetric reality.

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## Activities to Support Local Education Systems



### **School Transportation for the children of Susiya- 2010/2011**

For the past five years, the Villages Group has been involved in securing funds for the transportation of Susiya's children to the local school in Al-Tuwani (A Palestinian village in South Hebron Hills, located approximately 6 kilometers from the center of Susiya).

The root causes for the ongoing challenges facing Susiya's school children are political: the Israeli occupation authorities willfully neglect their civil responsibilities according to the Oslo agreement for the Palestinians who live in "Area C"; the Palestinian Authority (PA) had ignored its moral and political responsibilities to those who live in the remote and peripheral areas of the West-Bank, and had not made good upon its claim to the entire West Bank by reaching out and serving "Area C" communities. So, children such as Susiya's children "fall between the chairs", as the Hebrew expression go. Fortunately, due to the ongoing commitment of individuals, groups and organizations, and thanks to the generosity of British Shalom-Salaam Trust, Susiya's children have access to transportation to their school free of charge.

The present school year (2010/2011) marks the first significant change in the PA's perception of its responsibility for the education rights of Susiya's children. This year, The PA has launched an elementary school in Susiya. Located in five tents, this tiny school provides education for children in grades 1-4 (see below a letter from the Parents' Committee on the needs of this new school). Students in grades 5-9 still need transportation to the school at Al-Tuwani, a service that the PA still falls short of providing. Thus, for 2011 we still foresee a need to cover transportation costs - driver salary, fuel, insurance and maintenance.

The costs are estimated at US \$1,300 per month, or \$11,700 for the entire nine-month school year. So far we have secured only \$8,000 of this target sum. We welcome more contributions (**\$3,700** in this case) to enable us to cover the entire expenses.



### **A Letter from the Parents' Committee of the New School at Susiya**

*We are turning to you for support for our school which has only the most basic amenities. It is housed in several tents which makes us very vulnerable. For instance, it was destroyed in the storm that hit our region last December (2010). We had to rebuild the school from scratch, while both teachers and pupils took part in the reconstruction works. It should be noted that in spite of this the school year 2010-2011 opened on time with 45 pupils divided into 4 classes.*

*The Ministry of Education of the Palestinian Authority has authorised the establishment of our school as a response to the problem of our children whom we formerly sent to study in far away schools in the town of Yatta and the village of Al-Tuwani in South Hebron Hills.*

*Currently the school needs hygienic units (toilets), a well, writing materials and computers for the establishment of a computer room. The computer has become a basic learning tool and we need to teach our children to be computer literate. The school is situated in an area that is not connected to the electricity supply, but the problem could be solved by lap-top computers that could easily be charged by the educators at their homes. The school also needs a printer and a copying machine.*

*The school is near Israeli settlements, where it is forbidden for Palestinians to build on their own land and where the settlers attack those working the land or shepherding their flocks. For this reason we have left an area of some 3.5 acres (7 dunam) as a separation buffer that could serve as the school yard where the children can relax and breathe fresh air in between classes. In order to do this we need to build a fence to protect the area from shepherds in the neighborhood. We also need some trees and plastic to create a greenhouse where children can be taught and guided during their free time.*

*We are sending you this request and we are all sure that you will respond to our requests. **Our top-priority need is the building of 3 toilet units – \$1,300 for each unit.***

**Total needed to help support Day Schools for Susiya Children: \$3,700 for transportation + \$3,900 for the new school's toilets = \$7,600.**



### **After-School Enrichment Classes in South Hebron Hills**

The villagers of South Hebron Hills live under harsh conditions: mountainous topography, desert climate, limited sources of livelihood, constant threat of eviction by the occupation authorities, and a *de facto* creeping eviction by the neighboring settlements.

For pupils, both struggling ones and the most talented, the harsh conditions, as well as limited support from an undermined educational system, are making studies extremely difficult. Some pupils fail to acquire the basic skills of reading, writing and math, while those who master the skills often fail to continue their studies at later stages. Many children end up dropping out, in order to help their families make a living and fulfill the house chores.

#### **Goals:**

1. To establish an educational framework for strengthening and enriching primary school pupils, in order to prevent dropouts and help them study despite the difficulties described above.
2. To empower residents who are university graduates, by employing them in establishing and implementing the learning and enrichment classes.
3. The overall goal of this program, as of our other programs in South Hebron Hills, is to empower residents of the villages and support them in their efforts to strengthen their communities. We believe that the intrinsic strength of these communities will enable them to withstand the many difficulties they face, and continue to live on their lands.

For a detailed description of one such program, please check this story:

<http://villagesgroup.wordpress.com/2010/12/12/please-help-the-enrichment-learning-program-at-the-cave-dwellers-village-umm-fakra/>

We have already been running enriching classes in South Hebron Hills in the last two and a half years, in three places, and our accumulated experience has taught the following:

- **The importance of the personal attention from the teacher.** The main activity takes place over the weekend, when the teacher personally helps the pupils. Consequently, there has been a significant improvement in the children’s learning achievements, particularly in such subjects as math, English and Arabic, on which the program focuses. Over and above mathematics, Arabic and English, there are also projects in the fields of painting, drama and story reading.
- **The particular importance of the program is that it offers an intimate meeting place, within the family, where children can express themselves freely, without fear of being mocked by their school peers.**

It is our impression, based on many visits to the places where the program is running, that the learning enrichment program has been a great success and should continue.

Most of the financial support came from the British Shalom Salaam Trust and individual Israeli donors.

Now we face a need to find additional financial resources to complete this school year in two places, and to open an enrichment class in a new place (Tuba).

**Budget** (to complete the program in 2011):

Teacher’s salary: \$1,840 (\$230 per month, for 4 months, for two places)

Teaching materials: \$200

**Total**                    **\$2,040**

**Budget for Tuba** (the new location):

According to our experience, the budget for establishing a new class (equipment and facilities purchase, etc.) and running it for one year is **\$4,300**.

<b><i>Total requested for the Enrichment Centers:</i></b>	<b><i>\$6,340</i></b>
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### **Nursery School Project in South Hebron Hills**

**Umm Al-Kheir:** The nursery school in the community of Umm Al-Kheir has been a prime example of the good will of people throughout the globe put into practice. Umm Al-Kheir is considered by far the most vulnerable in South Mount Hebron, as only a barbed wire separates this Bedouin community from the settlement of Karmel. The population (total population is 126 refugee Bedouins) includes at least 10 children between the age between 3 to 6 years old. An idea was presented by the community, to establish a nursery school that would serve not only them but also other parts of the larger community of al-Faqir in which they live in. For further information, we have attached herewith the final report issued by the Village's Group in the aftermath of the nursery school inauguration, summarizing our experience in this project.

**Khashem Al Daraj:** Along with other partners (including Mahsoun Watch, UNRWA and the Leichhardt Friends of Hebron), the Villages Group is coordinating the renovation and re-establishment of the nursery school in the Bedouin community of Khashem Al Daraj. This is the easternmost (?) in South Mount Hebron. Despite the fact that the community has received a Master Plan and a new school is being currently built there by the international community, the vulnerability of the community came into light in November 2010, when Israeli occupation forces demolished 7 water cisterns associated with it.

The nursery school has been functioning since the year 2005 in an environment that is not necessarily conducive for good educational practices. As depicted by the following pictures, the nursery school is only one room in which around 30 pre-school students receive some education. According to the nursery school teacher, if she would admit all the students who desire attending her nursery school, this number can reach up to 45. The toys used by the students are worn down. The nursery school has no bathroom unit, no storage and no gate or fence.

A number of visits have been carried out by international and UN organizations to the site as to look for possible interventions. In the meantime, the immediate needs of the nursery school are being provided by infrequent donations. UNRWA has agreed to provide materials for the building of the nursery school in the amount of \$16,000. This amount covers around half of the money needed to cover the building costs. As such, there is still a need for further monetary assistance. The salary for the teacher has been provided through a grant from the British Shalom-Salaam Trust (BSST) (<http://www.bsst.org.uk/>).

**Susiya:** An idea that is currently floating is the establishment of a nursery school in the community of Susiya. The vulnerability of the community stems from a number of factors including the fact that it is surrounded by a ring of outposts, the settlement of Sussya and an Israeli military camp. This vulnerability is expressed on the ground, among other things, via frequent settler violence, and pre-determined transfer policies implemented by the Israeli Army through a series of demolitions. The idea of having a nursery school in the community is currently under consideration and discussion. We will provide additional information as progress takes place on the ground.

<i><b>Project</b></i>	<i><b>Status</b></i>	<i><b>Needed Donations</b></i>	<i><b>For what?</b></i>
<i><b>Umm al -Kheir Nursery School</b></i>	Rehabilitation is done	\$2,000	Salaries for the teachers for the remaining school year.
<i><b>Khashm Al Daraj Nursery School</b></i>	Design is done and \$12,000 worth of materials were provided. Salary for teacher covered.	\$20,000	To purchase the rest of the building materials and establish the nursery school as per the design.
<i><b>Susiya Nursery School</b></i>	Still in the early stages of planning	Not known as of yet	Information not readily available.



## Summer Camps 2011 in South Hebron Hills

In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the school summer vacation lasts three months, from June through August. In South Hebron Hills, home to some of the poorest, most neglected and marginalized populations in the West Bank, the children have no educational stimulus during this long vacation. They pass their time helping with house chores and shepherding, but mostly roam the hills risking encounters with violent settlers or military forces.

Following the great success of the 2009 and 2010 summer camps in Susiya – one of the region's largest villages – in 2011, we wish to help local activists establish another camp, for the children in the Bedouin village of Umm al-Kheir. Each camp will last two weeks, from 8 AM to 2 PM every day, and will host children who are 5 to 12 years old: 80 children in Susiya and 40 in Umm al-Kheir.

The program includes:

- Social games;
- Physical education and sports;
- Outdoor education – the surrounding scenery, plants and wildlife, and orientation exercises;
- Learning enrichment
- A one-day field trip to a West Bank destination (a zoo or an amusement park).
- We will help fund or provide:
  - Counselors – 7 for Susiya and 4 for Umm Al Kheir;
  - Snacks;
  - Activity equipment;
  - The field trip.

**Estimated cost: \$4,000 for Susiya + \$3,000 for Umm al-Kheir = \$7,000.** We have yet to obtain any funding pledges for this important activity.





### **The Salem Music Center**

The Salem Music Center is a venture developing gradually thanks to the ongoing cooperation between its local Palestinian initiators, from the village of Salem near Nablus, the Israeli volunteers of the Villages Group, and donors from Israel and abroad. Beginning in 2010, it offers children aged 9 to 16 group music lessons on various instruments (oud, guitar, violin, organ and drums). Each student learns to play his or her individual instrument, while also learning to play in an ensemble.

Now in its second year, the first class continues and a second class has already started. The center continues to develop and realize its vision.

During the first activity year and following a successful and enjoyable end-of-the-year concert for the community, the villagers' suspicion has turned into support, and the kids have gained more confidence. As Manar, one of the first year's pupils expressed it: "In general, studying music has improved my confidence. I used to be afraid of everything, but now I am less afraid." And the mother of Hadi (a pupil in the same class) said: "We are happy that he is learning to play the oud. I thank whoever is helping him in this."

You can find some more information about the project and a three years detailed program in: <http://villagesgroup.wordpress.com/2010/09/19/salem-music-center-3-year-plan/>

As mentioned, this project is supported both financially and professionally by individuals from various countries. For 2011, the urgent financial needs are **\$25,000**. This sum will serve mainly to:

- Expand the teaching staff to accommodate additional students.
- Move from the local council building to a rented building dedicated solely to the Center's activities.



## Supporting Academic Studies in South Hebron Hills

Supporting Palestinian students who can hardly afford their tuition has played an increasingly prominent role in our activity. This is especially true of students from the cave-hamlets region in South Hebron Hills. This is one of the most challenging regions in the Occupied Territories for higher learning: it is situated far from learning institutions, violence is perpetrated on a daily basis by the local Israeli settlers against Palestinian children on their way to school, and chronic poverty afflicts families that eke out their living from sheep and goat herding. All these and more constitute nearly insurmountable obstacles for the youngsters of the region trying to complete their basic education, let alone pursue a higher one. The few who do attempt to obtain higher education find themselves mostly too needy to afford academic studies.

Our support has two main goals:

- The scholarships we grant to the students are meant to increase their chances to achieve their degrees within a reasonable time span of four years.
- A communal goal - to encourage the students to support and empower their villages while learning and after completing their studies.

We have been extending this support for the past three and a half academic years, to 15-20 students a year. Given the difficulties to find employment in the Palestinian economy stifled by occupation, we try to meet the employment needs of graduated students within the framework of programs that answer the needs of their villages (see above, *'enrichment classes'*).

With the help of US OMEN (an American NGO) we have managed to provide \$330 per student per semester, for two semesters a year. This amount does not cover the cost of taking the summer semester, which would have enabled the students to shorten their studies period.

### **Budget:**

Average cost of the summer semester:           \$200  
 Number of students for the summer semester:   15

<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$3,000</b>
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### **Adult Learning and Creativity Center in Susiya**

In 2010, the Learning and Creativity Center in Susiya was opened; its aim is to empower Susiya as a community and to develop ties with Israelis and visitors from abroad. The vision of the Center is twofold: to serve as a place for learning and creativity that is inspired by, and integrated with, the daily life in Susiya, and to develop creative means of dealing with the Israeli occupation as well as with social and local problems. During the months of its activities, the center in Susiya has developed a number of projects for empowering the residents and promoting dialogue between the two peoples: Arabic lessons for Israelis and Hebrew lessons for the residents, art workshops, and additional activities are currently being developed. All of the programs in the Center are based upon the model of minimizing expenses, self-funding, and sustainability. A group of local Palestinians in cooperation with the Villages Group (with the support of additional Israeli and international activists), has accompanied the first stage of building the project, and it could use initial funding from outside. The Center is planned so that it will be able to function independently and to develop additional programs on its own. In order to operate the Center, to maintain it, and develop the activities there, an operating budget is needed, partly based on internal income and partly on external fundraising.

General aid needed for this program (including covering of the center's coordinator monthly salary on the amount of \$250): <b>\$4,000.</b>
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## Renovating Water Cisterns



### South Hebron Hills

South Hebron Hills (Massafar Yatta) is dotted with small villages whose residents subsist on agriculture – mostly shepherding but also some orchards and field crops. Conditions are very harsh: the terrain is hilly and rugged, there are no perennial streams and annual rainfall is only 150-300mm, none of it during the long summer. All (see comment in email) villages are not served by an organized water utility even for domestic needs, let alone for agricultural irrigation.

The area has been settled for many centuries. Traditionally, residents have relied upon an extensive network of rainwater cisterns, some of them ancient. Some cisterns can hold as much as 100 cubic meters. Falling inside the Oslo Accords “Area C”, South Hebron Hills is under full Israeli control, and thus subject to a complete and direct occupation regime, including all civilian matters. In recent years the Israeli government has used this control to limit Palestinian development in such regions, while neglecting to answer the needs of residents. In particular, the authorities forbid the excavation of new cisterns or even the cleaning of existing ones. Furthermore, the military is sent to destroy many cisterns – depriving their owners of a life-sustaining resource.

Confronted with the basic and urgent need for water, the residents of South Hebron Hills regularly defy this oppressive policy, cleaning existing cisterns and excavating new ones despite the prohibition to do so. We wish to help them do this more effectively by leasing mechanized equipment (such as backhoe, jackhammer, tractor and more), and purchasing sealant material to improve water retention.

Estimated cost per cistern: <b>\$1,500.</b>
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## Salem near Nablus

Salem and Deir El Hattab, two large villages on the eastern outskirts of Nablus, is where the Villages Group began its activities in 2002. Traditionally, residents have relied upon more extensive agriculture than in South Hebron Hills – first and foremost olive orchards. During the occupation regime’s first generation (1967-2000), working as day laborers in the Israeli market had eclipsed agriculture as the villages’ main income source, but the political deterioration has greatly diminished this option and brought agriculture back to the forefront.

The climate here is more typically Mediterranean: annual rainfall is 500-800mm, and there are a few small perennial springs. Otherwise, conditions are not unlike South Hebron Hills – harsh rugged terrain and long completely dry summers. Therefore, just like anywhere else in Israel-Palestine, here too an extensive system of cisterns has been excavated and maintained since ancient times.

Of the two villages, Salem’s agricultural lands are more at risk. Salem resides in “Area B” where the Israeli military interferes little in agricultural matters. However, most of its agricultural lands are designated “Area C” due to their proximity to settlements on the hilltops south and east of the villages. Here, unlike in South Mount Hebron, persistent efforts by the Villages Group have yielded a permission to maintain existing cisterns even inside “Area C”.

The Villages Group is helping the residents of Salem to unearth ancient cisterns, and then help with their cleaning, expansion and sealing, and with the improvement of catchment basins. Our most crucial role might be communicating with the military, to prevent work stoppage and to ward off settler harassment. Most of the work will be carried out by cistern owners. For public cisterns, work will be performed by village youth in organized work parties, thus serving also towards social and cultural empowerment. In addition, in Salem as in South Hebron Hills we hope to help with funding equipment rental and material purchase.

Estimated cost per cistern: <b>\$1,500.</b>
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For the longer-term, we also plan to help residents put together and submit to the military authorities’ plans for excavating new cisterns in “Area C” lands. We shall accompany such an effort with public and legal activities. **The renovation of the water cisterns is part of a larger agricultural project we wish to implement. An updated document on this project will be sent to you soon.**

## Emergencies

As per our continuous presence in the area, the village's Group finds itself faced with unexpected emergencies that do not fit within its "established" programs as outlined earlier. Due to the fact that our presence in South Mount Hebron stems from the position of friendship (rather from an institutionally-mandated role), we find ourselves compelled to deal with issues and emergencies that no other organization in the field is capable of handling. The most recent example for such an emergency took place in the vulnerable community of Wadi Jueish, located in the vicinity of the settlement of Susiya; as to deter an attack by the settlers of Sussya, the residents of the community defended themselves by throwing stones at the advancing settlers. Three of the community members were arrested in the aftermath as the settlers provided videotapes showing the Palestinians throwing stones. Due to the poor economical conditions of the community and the lack of presence of any organization dealing with this issue, the Group paid the bail to release the three Palestinians (in the amount of \$2,500), as well as for the lawyer who represented them.

Throughout the history of the Villages Group, similar emergencies have popped up now and then, affecting our overall financial obligations. As such, there is a need to for a general emergency fund that is flexible enough to allow us to face a multitude of emergencies without having any negative fallout on the on-going regular programs of the Group or on volunteers' personal finances.

**Estimated amount needed for the general emergency fund: \$10,000.**

