Conflict, poverty and climate change afflict many communities in the Middle East and Africa; for some, they threaten people's very survival. Such "communities in peril" lack clean, reliable water, sanitation and electricity, basic health care and education, and adequate economic opportunity. Women are particularly vulnerable, and families struggle to stay together. These are the ingredients of societal crisis that foster extremism and violence.

Berber Girls in Morocco

Such communities include Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan and displaced Sudanese from Darfur settling in and around Khartoum. Villagers isolated by location or lack of resources or infrastructure also are at-risk, such as the Berbers in Morocco's High Atlas Mountains and Egyptian farmers relocated to the desert near Lake Nasser.

The Near East Foundation identifies such communities and helps them to find homegrown solutions to the challenges of endemic poverty, conflict and climate change. NEF's hundred-plus staff (who all come from the countries where they work) guide communities to recognize the source of their problems and the benefits of collaborative problem solving, and to form community organizations to meet their basic needs. Communities gain skills and confidence to seek services from their governments which often adopt our programs as models for their own initiatives.

The Near East Foundation has been a long-time pioneer of international economic assistance. In 1915, we launched the first overseas humanitarian relief effort for Armenians seeking refuge from the Ottoman Empire. This served millions of World War I survivors in the Balkans, Iran and the Near East with orphanages, hospitals and schools. We then became the region's first international economic development agency, setting an example for President Truman's Point-Four Program in Iran and then for USAID in North, West and Sub-Saharan Africa. Today, NEF leads the way in empowering local professionals to serve their own communities through grassroots, participatory development.

2008 Accomplishments

- Launched project in Syria to provide Iraqi refugee women and adolescent girls reproductive health awareness and training to start small businesses;
- Secured a two-year grant from USAID to provide Moroccan youth in Casablanca slums with training and guidance to get jobs;
- Continued collaboration with Jordanian Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation with a new project to start businesses in six poor communities;
- Expanded the services of Sudanese community health center to include HIV/AIDS awareness;
- Organized six villages in rural Mali to obtain clean, reliable water supply, as part of climate change adaptation program;
- Renewed support from the Canadian government to assist five farming villages in the Egyptian desert to develop agricultural and other practices appropriate to extreme climatic conditions; and
- Employed 1,742 women in 24 women's centers in the West Bank to prepare daily supplemental nutrition for 54,000 kindergarten and primary school students and renovated ten kindergartens.
The US Department of State Middle East Partnership Initiative has funded NEF since 2004 to enhance enrollment and retention in rural primary schools, particularly for girls, in the High Atlas Mountains. From 2004 to 2007, on a budget of $600,000, NEF’s program focused on 21 schools in the Ghessate and Imminoulaoune rural communes in the Ouarzazate province with 3,000 students and increased overall attendance by 35%, girls’ attendance from an average of 10% to 100% and retention to 98%. (Photo by Jina Dev.)