

# Focus Group Interview

## ~North Bekaa~

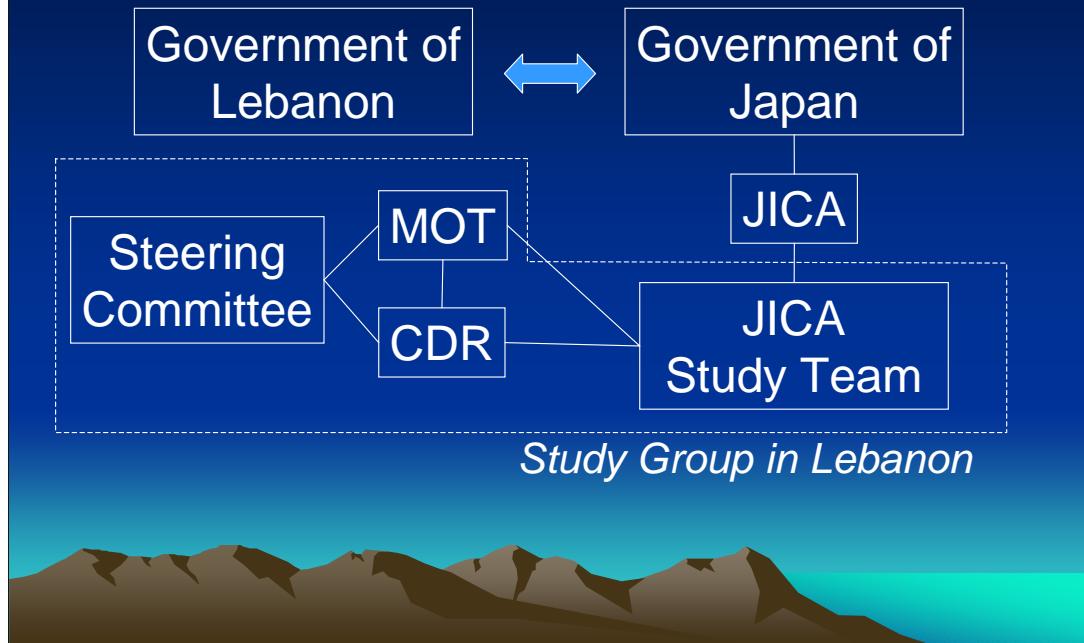
10 AM, JANUARY 17, 2004



Sandi Chesrown, on behalf of the JICA Study Team, welcomed the community of the Northern Bekaa Valley, particularly President Abdulla Aad of Qaa. She also thanked Mrs. Mona Fares, MOT, and Dr. Jaoudat Abou Jaoude, CDR, for their participation in the focus groups, and for supporting the project since its inception. She noted that if it hadn't been for Mrs. Fares's strong support of the community, bringing team members to Qaa, the team wouldn't have been aware of the Northern Bekaa's and Qaa's unique combination of cultural, rural and agro-tourism amenities and the opportunities for a tourism project.

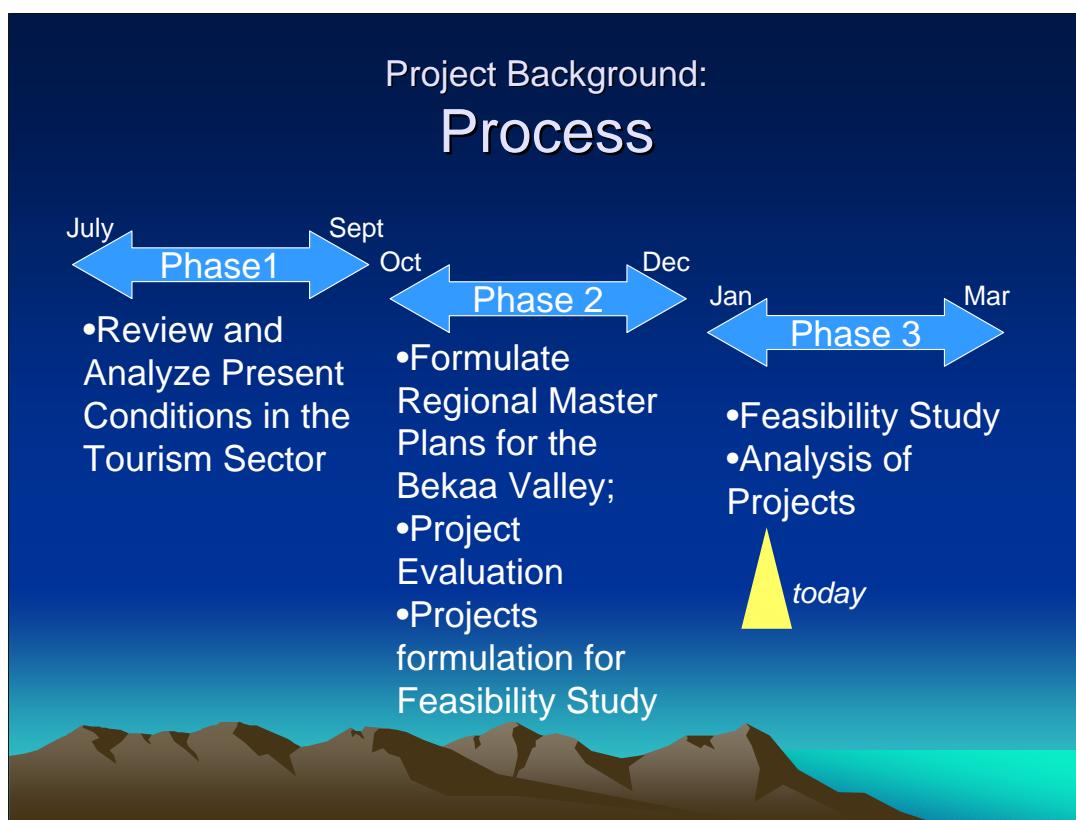
The President asked that each community member introduce himself or herself, and then Sandi asked that each JICA Study Team member introduce himself or herself. Following the introductions, Mrs. Fares explained the history of the project and thanked Dr. Haimari for his continuing involvement and support throughout the life of the project.

## Project Background: Organization



Ammar Abboud, JICA Study Team facilitator, explained the project's organizational chart, as illustrated in Slide 2.

## Project Background: Process



Ammar explained the project's phases, noting that Phase 1 and Phase 2 are completed, and that the team is now completing Phase 3 including an in-depth analysis of what the team is calling the Old Qaa Mountain Village Model for Rural Tourism.

Project Background:  
**Project Formation**

Technical  
approach

Participatory  
approach



**Implementable Plan**  
➤ Viable Projects  
➤ Institutional arrangement  
• Local Initiative  
• Government support

Ammar explained the project's regional planning approach, combining technical expertise with community participation and input on the master plan, to produce sustainable projects that benefit local communities through expanded jobs and visitor revenues. He added that the sustainability and whether or not the projects will be implemented depends on the balance of the approaches and the participation of all actors (local/national; private/public; profit/non-profit).

## Community approach

- Listening to the Community through Meetings, Field Surveys, Research
- August local site visits and discussions of living and built heritage prior to today's focus group



Ammar explained that the team's participatory planning approach included research and analysis, field surveys, and community meetings to understand the living and built heritage. This community approach provided team members with clear direction on how to best involve local people in tourism for their long-term economic benefit.

# Demand

- Eco or nature-based tourism, particularly French interested in rural gite concept
- Cultural heritage tourists increased visitation from Baalbeck



Ammar explained that the Northern Bekaa, including Qaa, would be very appealing to eco- or nature-based tourism, particularly French tourists interested in the “rural gite” concept. He then explained that rural gite can either include stays in local farm houses or, in the case of the team’s proposed project, stays in vernacular buildings utilizing “living heritage” amenities, such as handicraft and agricultural production, within the rural landscape.

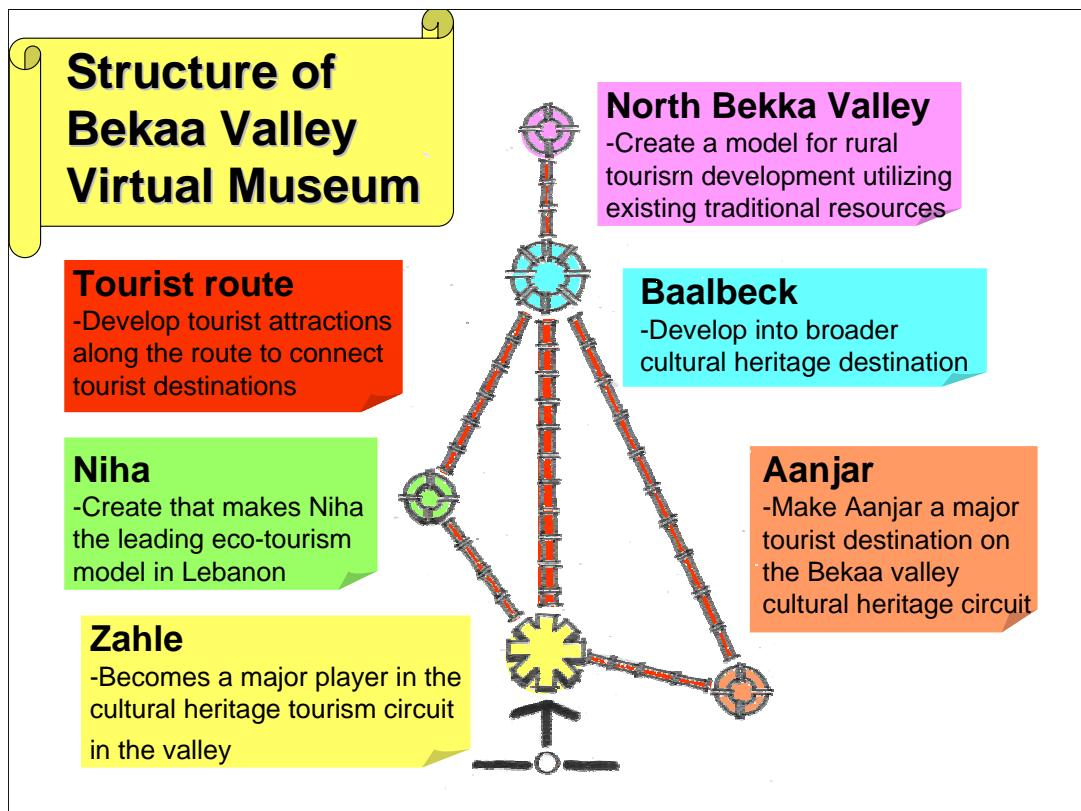
The second projected market is cultural heritage tourists, who are visiting Baalbek and wish to continue their journey north, either to see more of the countryside or to continue into Syria.

## Strategy (1)

- North Bekaa as Part of Bekaa Valley Virtual Museum
  - Weaving the Thread of Local Attractions to Expand Tourism Development and Alleviate Poverty
- Enhance the Well-Being of Local People through Increased Tourism Jobs and Markets



Ammar explained the team's strategy of linking sites under the framework of a "Bekaa Valley Virtual Museum" in order to expand the visitors' length-of-stay and spending patterns, thereby increasing the well-being of local communities through increased jobs and income.



Ammar discussed the framework of the Bekaa Valley Virtual Museum, and the way that it creates a route that draws visitors from Beirut to Niha, Zahle, Aanjar, Baalbeck and the Northern Bekaa, exploiting existing cultural and natural resources in each community. The goal is to draw tourists and encourage them to visit sites, dine, and lodge over a number of days rather than to do day trips in and out of Beirut. He emphasized the creation of “a road map” for tourism creating a large circuit for a prolonged tourism experience, where each focal point serves as an attraction leading to another location.

## Strategy (2)

- To develop a rural and nature based tourism attraction that draws Beirut and international visitors,
  - particularly French and other European, through the Bekaa Valley to Hermel and on to Bcharre,
  - by creating an attractive but authentic project that preserves local heritage buildings and promotes a traditional way of life.
- Qaa has an idyllic natural and well managed agrarian landscape
  - with traditional farm buildings in a remote location.
- The combined landscape and manmade environment would be enticing to visitors,
  - when combined with cultural and other activities, such as music, song, dance, sheep shearing, planting, hiking, etc.
- The Old Qaa Mountain Village would become a pilot project for rural tourism (rural gite) in Lebanon.

Ammar discussed the team's strategy of focusing on Qaa as a "niche rural or agro tourism market" that offers visitors an attractive, authentic product – a well managed agrarian landscape - that preserves local heritage buildings and promotes a traditional way of life. Visitors could become part of the agricultural landscape and living heritage through activities, such as music, song, dance, sheep shearing, planting, hiking, handicraft production, etc.

## Nature based tourism

- Discovering Bekaa's Land of the Sun – Nature Based Tourism Route



Ammar explained that Qaa would become part of a well promoted nature based route, drawing visitors from natural and cultural attractions in the southern Bekaa, through the valley to Qaa, and continuing to the Al Jord eco-tourism project in the north.

# Proposed projects

- Old Qaa Mountain Village Model for Rural Tourism
  - Restoration and adaptive reuse of antiquated farm buildings,
    - to become a combination visitors/handicrafts center and 24 rural gite bedrooms – unique lodging at affordable prices
  - Training (handicrafts and visitor services)
  - Marketing and promotion package
    - brochure, web site, advertising, links to rural/agro tourism operators in Lebanon and abroad

Ammar explained that the project would involve a number of activities, including restoration and “adaptive reuse” of a water mill at the edge of Qaa to become a combination visitors center/handicrafts training and exhibition center. Nearby antiquated farm buildings (homes and animal mangers) would be transformed into 24 plus rural gite bedrooms, i.e., unique lodging at affordable prices. Other project activities would include a comprehensive marketing and promotion package and training program to create a brochure and web site with links to rural/eco-tourism operators in Lebanon, the Levant, and abroad.

# North Bekaa Cultural and Living Heritage of Qaa, Ras Baalbeck and Fekeha



Sandi walked the group through a visit to the North Bekaa. She said that visitors would start their journey in Ras Baalbeck, where they would visit the studio of a local oud maker and perhaps hear him play a few songs. They would continue to nearby Fekeha, where they could watch local rug makers at work. Visitors would continue to the Old Qaa Mountain Village and its idyllic landscape, which would provide the visitors with “interactive tourism”. Guests would arrive at the Water Mill Visitors Center (rural gite reception desk) to park and check-into their rooms. They could then either walk on a pedestrian trail directly to their rooms or they could visit the Handicrafts Center (in the same building), where they could watch local women weave rugs or produce other handicrafts.

Relaxation, a hike up Old Qaa Mountain to visit the convent, or horseback riding could follow. Depending on the season, they might join the local farmers in their planting and harvesting. Special events might include a sheep shearing or harvest festival, in which they could participate. There might also be visits to local schools, where visitors could participate in a day or two of teaching language courses, with a special fee set up to benefit the schools.

Before sunset, they could sit on the roof of the Visitors Center facing the mountain and enjoy a glass of local Bekaa Valley wine, while watching the sun set over the rural landscape. They could then either dine at the Old Qaa Mountain Village’s restaurant on local foods or go into Qaa and dine at a local restaurant.

## Activities (1)

- Development of rural gite standards, design and construction and protective landscape viewshed policy
- Master plan and site management plan to include circulation
  - parking at visitors center and pedestrian trails/hiking up mountain
- Institution building to create North Bekaa Valley Tourism Development Committee
  - branch of Bekaa Valley Tourism Council
- Institution building to create local branch of Bekaa Valley Handicrafts Cooperative

Ammar explained the anticipated activities, as described in Slide 13.

## Activities (2)

- Creation of North Bekaa Tourism Map
  - Include stops in Ras Baalbek at oud maker's studio and Byzantine church and site, Fekaa carpet weaver studio, Qaa, Orontes River, and links to Al Jord ecotourism site in Hermel
- Special event planning for interactive annual Festivals
  - Agricultural, traditional food, sheep shearing, spinning, dying, etc.
- Marketing and promotion program
  - Brochure and web site linked to MOT web site and local tour operators
- Design and construction
  - including training in appropriate renovation techniques

Ammar explained the anticipated activities, as described in Slide 14.

## Expected results (1)

- local jobs and income to local people,
  - including in construction, handicrafts, accommodations, food, and associated tourism services and operations
- trained local staff (operational and guides) and strengthened municipality
- contribution to preservation of rural way of life and promotion of local heritage
- agricultural and mountain landscape protection



Ammar explained the expected results, including local employment and enhanced income for local people, trained local staff and a strengthened municipality, a preserved rural way of life and promotion of the local heritage, and agricultural and mountain landscape protection. Sandi noted that the concept of “conservation easements” or another legal method to control building on the landscape and maintain the pristine rural view-sheds would be very important to the success of the project.

## Expected results (2)

- site interpretation to educate visitors
- increased number of tourists and associated revenue
- promotion of tourism niches in Lebanon
  - nature-based/agro and rural tourism
- improved local environmental and cultural awareness



Ammar noted that other anticipated results are site interpretation, promotion of rural/agro and nature-based tourism for all of Lebanon, and improved local environmental and cultural awareness and pride in the local heritage.

# Implementation Discussion

- What is necessary for implementation?
  - Who will carry it out?



Sandi said that for all of the local tourism projects, there need to be “local champions” who will implement the studies. The JICA Study Team assumes that in the North Bekaa the municipalities and the NGOs, as well as the private sector, would be the local champions. The community confirmed and added the churches to the list.

Sandi asked them for their comments on the master plan concepts. Do they agree with the team’s analysis and how could the team improve the concepts and ideas?

The head of the NGO CREADEL recommended that access routes to Aleppo and Hermel be provided, to encourage regional tourism. Sandi explained that the team’s plans promote tourism north to the Al Jord eco-tourism project in Hermel, and that, although it isn’t part of this project as we are focused on the Bekaa Valley, local tour operators could encourage regional tourism.

Father Elian Nassrallah thanked the team for its work, and emphasized that the region needs jobs. He said that people have lost hope, and that this is a new light for them. He also thanked the team for recognizing the local heritage, such as the water mill, which local people take for granted and do not appreciate as an asset. He said it is good to have more than one project to link Qaa to other parts of the Bekaa, and that local people will be very willing to cooperate in implementation.

# Implementation Discussion

- What is necessary for implementation?
  - Who will carry it out?



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Sister David representing a local NGO also thanked the team, and stressed the importance of recognizing the “little houses” of the cultural heritage, which she felt were very important and unique. She said her school is producing maquettes of the cultural heritage under the promotional title, “Don’t Forget Qaa.” This year her students researched archaeological sites in Lebanon, which they do not have an opportunity to visit, and she recommends that education be involved in the team’s project. Sandi responded that this is a very good idea, and that we will incorporate ideas for the students into the project, perhaps involvement in the adaptive reuse construction process or heritage seminars.

Another gentleman remarked that he would prefer to keep visitors in Lebanon and not encourage them to go to Syria. He was worried that if Qaa is at the end of the tourist circuit no one will come. Sandi explained that Qaa would not be on the end, but would be en route to Hermel for nature and agro-based tourists and would be an extension from Baalbeck with a variety of activities to attract visitors. She also noted the concept of the virtual museum, i.e., that sites strengthen and compliment rather than compete with one another.

Another NGO head said that the area needs to promote more sports activity, such as horseback riding and river rafting, and elderly “peace and quiet” tourism. She also said organic food production should be promoted. Sandi agreed and said that the project would promote both horseback riding and river rafting as part of the visitor activities and organic food production as part of the agro-tourism attraction.

# Implementation Discussion

- What is necessary for implementation?
  - Who will carry it out?



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A gentleman said he would like to see a water pond added to the plan near the Visitors Center and hunting as a visitor activity. Sandi explained that the team had not thought of a water pond but will analyze it. She discouraged hunting, as being an activity that eco- and nature based tourists do not usually support.

Another gentleman said that tourism activities should be coordinated, and Sandi responded that the team is recommending a type of management cooperative to operate the project, in order to spread the benefit throughout the communities.

Mrs. Fares noted that an eco-tourism project is hard work, and that local people have to be convinced. She said that MOT has pushed for this study for 6-7 years, and brought not only the JST to Qaa but also ambassadors from Switzerland and Germany in order to encourage donor involvement and implementation.

Dr. Abou Jaoude agreed that MOT has worked very hard on this project and thanked Mrs. Fares and Dr. Haimari for all their efforts in raising the team's and the donors' awareness of Qaa, stressing that Qaa is included because of Mrs. Fares's persistence and public relations.

The head of CREADEL agreed and said that, as a member of the JICA Study Team's Baalbeck focus group, she has seen local participation at work, and that the method is excellent in allowing local expression of people's interests and needs.

# Implementation Discussion

- What is necessary for implementation?
  - Who will carry it out?



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The representative from the Ministry of Social Affairs said that one way to facilitate implementation is to involve volunteer youth camps. Each year 6 camps are held, and the program could guarantee 600-700 volunteers (18-26 year olds). Sandi responded that this (vocational training) is an excellent idea and could be very beneficial, particularly as they could be trained in the area of re-construction of the water mill and rural gite structures. Mrs. Fares said that the program this year involves environmental and rural heritage awareness, and that next year it might involve architectural heritage and renovation. (Could involve university architectural programs in the planning and training process.)

# Funding

- Do you have any ideas for fund raising for the project?
- Discussion of donor meetings.



Sandi noted that during the coming weeks, the JICA Study Team will be meeting with perspective donors to encourage them to become involved in funding and implementation of the projects. She listed some potential donors' interests based on research regarding their portfolios.

*Invitation*

## Tele-seminar for communities

- JICA Study Team prepares a seminar to share the experiences and knowledge of tourism development in Japan.
- Two seminars will be held on separate days.
  - 26 Jan (Mon): Eco-tourism development
  - 30 Jan (Fri): Partnership among Private and public
  - 12:00~15:00 (the seminar begins at 13:00)
  - At Berytech, Mar Roukos
- Transportation fee can be reimbursed. Snacks will be served.
- 4 members from North Bekaa are invited for each seminar. (We need the participants' name.)



In conclusion of the meeting, Ammar invited participants to the community tele-seminars on January 26 and 30<sup>th</sup> in Beirut, and encouraged them to participate. Sandi noted that Yoshi Nakagawa, JICA Study Team transportation engineer, had created the program, and was present if participants had any questions.

# Theme of the seminar

- 26, Jan: Eco-tourism Development
  - History and definition of eco-tourism
  - Potential of the compatible Eco-tourism development with the local agriculture industry.
  - Case study: Hoshino-resort.
- 30, Jan: Partnership in tourism
  - Typical and Desired organizations
  - Two main objectives in partnership:
    - To achieve sustainable and safe development
    - To share the development
  - Case study: Kusatsu town





Photos in Tele-seminar  
For NGOs  
On 16, Nov., 2003



The President thanked everyone for coming, and a number of participants joined the team at Mrs. Fares's house for a delicious lunch, followed by a site visit to explore the conditions of the farm buildings.