

VEGA Long Term Business Advisor's Past Assignment in Lebanon

VEGA LTBA/MBAEC Assignment

VEGA Long Term Business Advisers (LTBAs) serve under two Member Organization programs, one of these is the Citizen's Development Corps (CDC) MBA Executive Corps Program (MBAEC)

In the spring of 2005, an MBAEC team in Lebanon was assigned to assess the needs of rural Lebanese communities and citizens and evaluate USAID's efforts at satisfying some of these needs through a service delivery system of contracting with American and Lebanese non-profits. The assignment involved interviewing Lebanese citizens — elected and appointed municipal officials, school system representatives, officials from non-profit organizations, the business community, and others — to learn about their needs and use the knowledge to develop a study of USAID's service delivery initiatives. The main purpose was to identify any gaps between the needs and services. The deliverable was the preparation of a report that the CDC team would draft for submission to USAID for their consideration. CDC contracted José E. Martinez as a Municipal Expert because of his experience as a professional planner and consultant at the local and regional government level for over 30 years.



José E. Martinez (center) conducting a focus group; Ms. Denise Abou Zeid, Arabic translator (far left); Ms. Svetlana Loginova (right) and Mr. Charles Abdallah, Lebanese Economist and Consultant.

Professional Career before LTBA/ MBAEC

José E. Martinez has experience in comprehensive and strategic planning, municipal operating and capital improvement budgeting. He was the Executive Director of a Business Improvement District in Austin, Texas, and in 1996, he started his own strategic planning, program management and facilitation consultancy, José E. Martinez, LLC.

Previous Volunteer Assignments

- OAS, Buenos Aires, Argentina — Conducted presentations to Latin American Government Officials on Civic Engagement.
- Programa Bolivar, Lima, Perú — Conducted a presentation on Strategic Planning Processes and Business Improvement Districts.
- Citizens Development Corps, San Miguel Ixtahuacán, Guatemala — Performed a needs assessment of the municipal government in 2004 and assisted in developing a capital improvements budget process in 2005.

What effect did the volunteer assignment have on your relationship with the host country/region?

My assignment in Lebanon has had a great impact on my relationship with the Middle East. I found the Lebanese people in both the rural and urban areas to be very warm and inviting. Lebanon's greatest export to the world is its educated and innovative youth. The universities are excellent and they train countless number of young Lebanese that then have to leave for other Middle Eastern countries as well as countries in the west — Europe as well as North and South America to find meaningful employment. I learned that there are more Lebanese in Brazil, Canada, and the United States than there are in Lebanon!

As a result of my visit to Lebanon I have developed an interest in learning Arabic. My dark complexion caused numerous Lebanese to speak to me in Arabic; that made me feel as if I could blend into the crowd! I intend to enroll in Arabic class, return to Lebanon, and visit Jordan, Syria and other Middle Eastern countries.

What do you remember most about being a Long Term Business Adviser?

One of my major assignments was to conduct focus groups consisting of Lebanese nationals — elected and appointed municipal officials, school system representatives, non-profit organizations, the business community, and general citizens — to determine what their experience was with the ongoing USAID program delivering services to rural Lebanese communities. I was able to guide the group to a factual and critical discussion of the USAID program and was assisted by very capable Arabic-English translators in conducting the focus groups.

How do you think you contributed the most as an adviser?

My roles were Municipal Expert and focus group facilitator. As the Municipal Expert, in a period of just five weeks, I participated in numerous interviews that included national and local government elected and appointed officials, university professors from the American University in Beirut, local school district representatives, non-profit agency representatives, business people, as well as our own Lebanese economist and consultant, Charles Abdallah, who was the source of a substantial amount of valuable information.

Our team came to the collective conclusion that the Lebanese system of government paid insufficient attention to local municipal governments, thereby not fostering essential improvements in local political systems and local economic development. Lebanese local governments, as municipal governments everywhere else in the world, have the responsibility of serving their constituents with essential human services and public utility infrastructure, but have limited tax collection authority making long delays between tax collection and receipt of tax revenues. Furthermore, what is collected is not necessarily equal to the tax revenues the municipalities will receive.

Small Lebanese municipalities usually lack trained personnel and other administrative resources. In rural areas, historical control by specific elite groups of municipal governments and their coffers limit the equitable distribution of services to the population. Rural populations' lack of information about their rights further limits that equitable distribution of municipal services and the control of their municipal governments.

We concluded that greater attention should be paid to strengthening the aggregation of municipalities within each region in Lebanon, or the Ca-

zas, instead of the individual municipalities. This would make the municipal strengthening process more democratic; that is, the improvements would be discussed openly, or transparently, and effected in like manner.

Our group recommended the possibility of community-based organizations taking the lead in orchestrating the provision of some of these services. Such organizations would involve local and regional groups vs. the current control by the national government. Giving the responsibility to local groups would facilitate participation at the local level thereby empowering local participants in government issues. I recommended that some of the empowerment of local representatives could be introduced in the form of strategic planning processes; which would be an excellent means to truly inform and educate local leaders as to their roles as responsible municipal and regional leaders providing for their constituents. By undertaking such strategic planning processes local leaders would gain information about Lebanese laws and regulations affecting rural communities and their constituents — "planning from the outside in." They would also analyze their local strengths and weaknesses — "planning from the inside out." By educating local leaders on the topics of their municipal government responsibilities, such local groups would then be empowered to monitor their local elected officials' expenditures of their local tax revenues and insist on a complete transparency of the local decision-making process.

The greatest contribution was helping to make recommendations about what USAID should do to improve its delivery of services to rural Lebanese communities.



LTBA—Long Term Business Adviser

MBAEC—MBA Executive Corps