

School mapping in Palestine: an assessment of applications and training for the Ministry of Education and Higher Education

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Through the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) in Paris, I was requested by the Ramallah office of UNESCO to assist the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOE) in Palestine in assessing future possibilities for school mapping. The request for this assessment came from the Directorate of Planning and Development as a result of their concerns about how school mapping could be used for planning. I left Windhoek in the afternoon of the 3rd of December and arrived in Palestine for my first meeting at about 11h00 on the next day. Briefing meetings were held with Dr. Said Assaf (Assistant Deputy Minister for Development Affairs), Mr. Saadeh Hamoudeh (Director General of Planning Directorate), Mr. Tawfiq Taher (Director of Planning Directorate), Mr. Abdullah Abdullah (GIS Consultant) and other members of the school mapping team in the Directorate of Planning and Development.

It became clear during the early briefings that there was a misunderstanding about my role in the mission. While the terms of reference required that I assess how school mapping could be used for planning, staff of the MOE expected me to provide training over 3 days to show how school mapping could be used for planning.

Although not prepared with material for such a course, I attempted to provide ideas, suggestions and guidance during the training on the 5th, 6th and 7th of December. About 40 people attended the course, nine of these being linked from Gaza via a video conferencing link. On the first day, introductory material on the MOE's planning requirements was presented by Mr Saadeh Hamoudeh. This was followed by a presentation by me on definitions of schools mapping, GIS and geographical aspects of education. I chose to define school mapping as a broader concept than the focus on micro-planning usually adopted by IIEP, instead treating school mapping as a process covering all aspects of mapping educational parameters. It was stressed that school mapping was a means and GIS a tool that helped provide perspectives and information which could be useful for education planning. School maps are thus no different from the maps that we commonly use to plan our journeys and that give us new perspectives on the world. It remains for us to select the plans to chose where we go.

I also described the main applications of school mapping: (a) for local, district or regional planning, where the focus is usually on planning the provision of education through individual schools, (b) for purposes of national planning in establishing priorities and the allocation of resources to different parts of a country, (c) for monitoring and evaluation on an ongoing basis, (d) for providing new insights and diagnoses, and (e) in presenting ideas and information to decision makers and other interested audiences.

On the second day, I presented a variety of examples of school mapping applications from Namibia. This was followed by presentations on some aspects of school mapping

information available in the Palestinian MOE. Participants were requested to identify applications or issues, problems and challenges in Palestine which they considered could benefit from school mapping. A rich variety of proposals were made, some of which are discussed below.

During the presentations and discussions it became clear that there was a lack of clear ideas on applications for. Everyone seemed to agree that school mapping was a “good thing”, but it was not obvious what should be done with it. In response to these quandaries, the third day began with my suggestions on how school mapping might assist the planning process. The following applications were suggested:

1. Rationalizing the network and curriculum of schools, for example in Nablus, to ensure that each school provides appropriate grades that compliment those of nearby schools, and that students can readily move from one phase of education to the next.
2. In conjunction with this, investigating and recommending changes to schools to improve efficiency in relation to the sizes of schools and use of classrooms. This is based on the fact that many schools and classes are small.
3. Planning new schools in densely populated areas, for example in Gaza, where schools are overcrowded, and where there is extensive use of double and triple shifts.
4. Planning the establishment of new vocational and technical schools, both from a national perspective and at specific locations within selected districts.
5. Planning appropriate deployments of teachers from one area to another.
6. Reorganizing networks of schools in relation to the erection of Israeli barriers to movements.
7. Selecting schools in which special facilities can be established, for example libraries and computer training laboratories.
8. Rationalizing schools that are now under-utilized, for example in having too many classrooms in relation to enrolments.
9. Assessing changes in enrolments between schools, between towns and villages, and between districts.
10. The formation of school clusters.
11. Negotiations with local communities and politicians.
12. Understanding reasons for drop-out and poor performance.

Of course, my knowledge of the Palestinian education system and the challenges it faces is extremely limited, and many other, more useful applications are certain to apply. The final session of the course focused on how demands for school could be generated, as follows:

1. Publishing a variety of maps and making copies to give to appropriate people.
2. Compilation of maps of schools in each district, and the production of many copies of these for wide distribution.
3. Compilation and production of an atlas of education in Palestine. Publication of a newsletter on school mapping. The provision of services to the districts, especially through diagnostic analyses of needs, challenges and plans in each area. Actively engaging senior management to cultivate their interest and to support their needs.

7. Create a responsive and creative service.
8. Developing and sustaining links between the schools and the MOE

In addition to the training sessions, I held discussions at various and repeated times with UNSECO and UNICEF staff, and officials in the MOE Directorate of Planning.

Some general observations and recommendations

My overall observation is that the school mapping division in the MOE is well equipped with data, software, hardware and staff. The planning staff appeared to me to be enthusiastic, in fact unusually so compared to most civil service planners. With the exception of an analytical approach to the work – an aspect discussed below – all the inputs are in place to deliver a successful school mapping service. What is now required is get the service moving: by applying school mapping to the kinds of issues described above, and by cultivating a demand to sustain the approach and service (note, school mapping is a service, not a system; the same philosophy should be applied to EMIS). Note also that two excellent reports, respectively on use needs and implementation of GIS for school mapping, have been compiled by Abdullah Abdullah, a consultant supporting the development of mapping in the MOE.

A point raised repeatedly during the discussions was on if, and how school mapping could contribute to the creation of the next 5-year development plan, a document due to be drafted during the next six months. In my view school mapping will not play much of a role during this central-level planning process. This is because little time will be available for school mapping and indeed other analyses, and because the 5-year development plan will concentrate heavily on national priorities, policies, strategies and programmes. Little attention will therefore be given to regional needs and geographical completed. This is unfortunate, but there is probably little that can be done to change the timing and perspective of the plan.

If school mapping is to develop as an integral part of an active planning process, the MOE planners need to adopt a more analytical, questioning attitude to processing their information. Of course, this is true for planning as a whole. Currently, there is too much faith in the optimistic assumption that data and GIS will somehow deliver answers. This approach will not work. Unless people ask questions, they will get no answers. I have two recommendations on how an analytical approach could be cultivated. First, the planning staff should be challenged. Senior members of the MOE should demand that the planners investigate various issues and deliver clear recommendations. Members of the donor community in Palestine could also help in setting such challenges. Second, although I would prefer for the school mapping division to develop as independently of donor/consultant support as possible, there might be a need in the future for someone to work for a few weeks in the MOE to lead the planners into an analytical approach to their work. However, I suggest that this possibility be assessed some months from now, and only if the MOE requests this kind of support.

As is the case in some many governments around the world, Palestine's MOE lacks clear and close linkages between the central head office and activities in the schools and

districts. One great potential of school mapping is to forge close linkages between these levels because it can simultaneously serve local and head office needs. School mapping can provide a bridge of information, allowing people at the centre to see and assess all the details of local schooling, while also translating central policies and programmes into interventions at the school level. In this role, school mapping does much to enhance and to level debates about education.

Finally, the Director of Planning asked me to draft suggestions for job descriptions for the school mapping staff. After giving the matter some thought, I am reluctant to do so, simply because my understanding of circumstances is too shallow. However, I do hope that any job descriptions will embody the spirit of the recommendations made above. In summary, good progress has been made in assembling a school mapping service, and much can now be achieved to enhance the Palestinian education system.

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