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**Building a System of Higher Education:  
Experiences from Another Small Country**

I remember when I visited Al Azhar University in Gaza a few years ago. We looked in on a lecture for beginners, and there were several hundred young female students with their white scarves, listening to the lecturer. To me, this was a very moving sight, a sight that I very often recall in my memory. It was a symbol of hope and promise for the future of the Palestinian people. This hope and promise must be kept alive and strengthened!

I was presented to the students as the rector of the University of Oslo and I told the students that, one day, one of them would be the rector of that university. They laughed, but I hope that some of them did hide this in their hearts. The Palestinian people need both young girls and young boys with ambition and a quest for knowledge.

We, the participants to this conference, all know the importance of a viable, efficient and high-quality system of tertiary education for the Palestinian people. Natural resources are limited, and the future of the Palestinian people will depend primarily on its human resources. Already, much - remarkably much - has been achieved with the eight universities and many colleges. I have visited some of the universities. I have been impressed by the high standards I have seen, but also struck by the obvious lack of resources.

The long-term Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank has of course influenced several aspects of the Palestinian society, including higher education. But what is so impressive is the fact that the Palestinian people have managed to keep a high educational level in these difficult years, and to give knowledge to children and young people. As far as I know, the Palestinian universities have probably been the only major institutions which have deep roots in the local communities and which have, over the years, continuously been able to function as coherent bodies, with a relatively effective administration.

But this is certainly not the time to rest on your laurels - or for the international academic society to think that having reached such results, the Palestinian universities need no help in the future. It is quite clear that international assistance is absolutely necessary to develop further the educational system, and even sustain the current system.

I am no expert on the situation of the Palestinian people or on their educational system. I therefore prefer to speak about something I know a bit more about, and I thought it might be useful to draw some parallels to the experiences of a small country like Norway in the field of higher education.

I will start by going back as far as the very beginning of the 19th century. Norway was then a part of the kingdom of Denmark-Norway. Norway did not at that time have a university of its own. The young people who wanted a university degree, had to go to Copenhagen university. The establishment of the University of Oslo in 1811 was the result of a long period of persistent work by Norwegian patriots. A Norwegian university was regarded as an important element in the struggle for national independence. Nicolai Wergeland won a prize for the best treatise on a Norwegian University. He maintained that the establishment of a Norwegian university was a matter of absolute necessity, the only thing that could satisfy the Norwegian people, and reconcile the people with its position as regards Denmark.

In 1811 the Danish-Norwegian king in Copenhagen no longer could resist the pressure, and he signed the decree that declared that a complete university should be established in Norway. Bonfires were lit all over the country, poems of gratitude were written, and people - rich and poor - contributed to the university, either in money or in grain. At one time, a few years later, the university had no money to pay out the salaries, but they had full granaries.

The university came to a country that was poor in resources and marked by war and economic problems. But for Norway and for the university, I think it was extremely important that the university was up and standing in 1814, when Norway was more or less forced into a union with Sweden.

During the first years, the main task was to educate officials for the new state, besides the work of organising a new university. But slowly, the professors also started doing research, and after a few decades, good research was going on in many fields. But 135 years would pass until Norway got its second university, the University of Bergen, which was founded in 1946. The authorities felt that it was important to concentrate the scarce resources, not least the human resources, in one institution. But as you may know, Norway is a long country, with many mountains, and travelling in former days was complicated, not because of man-made hindrances, but because of nature itself. One of my husband's great grandfathers lived in a city in the south of Norway, 300 kilometres from Oslo. He walked from his hometown to Oslo twice a year. He shared a winter-coat with his room-mate, so in wintertime, they could only attend the lectures every second day. But people from the west coast or from the north of Norway, would have a much more complicated journey.

As you have understood, there were more differences than similarities between Norway then and the situation of the Palestinian people today as regards higher education. There are already many Palestinian universities, the organisations are in place. What I wish to emphasise is the great importance of a national university.

Norway is a small nation of 4,4 million people. We have now 4 universities, of which the University of Oslo is by far the biggest, with its more than 38,000 students. The University of Tromsø, up in the north of Norway, was established mainly for political reasons, the hope being that the students will stay on in the north when they have completed their studies. This has actually happened to a certain degree. Norway

also has 26 state colleges with mainly professional studies like nursing, engineering, journalism.

The policy of higher education and research of the Norwegian government has recently been expressed by the term “Norgsnett”, which means the Network of Norway, that is a network of research and higher education in Norway. By this the government wished to emphasise that the organisation of the institutions of higher education in Norway should be based on a principle of co-operation and division of labour. The University Act states: “Within a national and higher education network, the institutions shall co-operate and complement each other’s academic activities. Educational courses shall be planned and viewed in relation to other international and national facilities”. The main idea is that a small country like Norway does not have resources that allow for 30 institutions of higher education to do the same thing.

I believe that at the present stage, and with the present lack of resources specialisation and co-operation is also a must for the Palestinian institutions of higher education. It is extremely important not to spread the resources too thinly over too many institutions. For a small country it is of utmost importance to have at least one or two universities of international standard, and with scholars that can be members of the international research society.

As institutions, the universities reflect and represent basic social values. These values, when enacted, correct social development, transcend conflicts and contribute to international understanding and solidarity. This also implies that members of a university - both students and staff - often harbour and express criticism of the society of which their institution is a part. Universities are consequently often exposed to attempts at control and even reprisals. In the Norwegian Act relating to universities and colleges, it is stated: “The institutions can not be instructed as to the content of their teaching, research or artistic or scientific development work”.

It is in the strategy of the University of Oslo to protect actively its own independence towards the authorities and towards the commercial interests. We believe that one of the most important tasks of a university is the critical function. The universities shall be critical of all institutions and all actions, both by private and by official people and institutions. It is also our policy to direct our attention to universities that experience repression.

We, who are representatives of the academic communities, do hope, and do expect, that the peace process will be resumed and continued with palpable results. We wish to discuss what our contribution can be to enhance the peace process. We believe strongly that the PEACE Programme and the promotion of the inter-university co-operation with the Palestinian universities can make important contribution to advancing the peace process.

There is, as I said before, a need for academic solidarity, and a stronger commitment from the universities in other countries. Most of the universities in Europe, however, are not in a very good economic situation. To be able to contribute

in a meaningful way, they and the PEACE Programme will therefore need support from their authorities and from the international organisations.

On the other hand, it is equally important to have a clearer assessment of the needs and the strategies for the further development of the Palestinian universities. Building a good system of tertiary education takes time. And there is one important fact that must be emphasised. Research takes time. Co-operation in research should preferably last for several years. To build competence in a specific topic may also take very long time. It is now extremely important that the Palestinian Authorities, including Faculty members, look into the future, make plans for the future! And a fruitful co-operation with universities from Europe presupposes long time planning - also from the Palestinian universities.

The University of Oslo is currently establishing a systematic expansion of formalised co-operation with universities abroad. We must identify the Norwegian university profiles of interest and capabilities in collaboration efforts which reflect significant Palestinian needs with regard to teaching, learning, research and service.

The Palestinian universities have probably been the only major institutions which have deep roots in the local communities and which have, over the years of occupation, continuously been able to function as coherent bodies with a relatively effective administration.

### **The Co-operation between the University of Oslo and Palestinian Universities**

Late in 1994, a delegation from the University of Oslo visited seven Palestinian universities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The objective was to prepare a substantial documentation for funding to the Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation (NORAD), to strengthen the competence and capacity building of Palestinian universities and to strengthen the institutional linkages of higher education between Norway and Palestine.

Twelve projects were proposed following the delegation tour, and so far four projects have been supported by NORAD:

1. Department of Special Education; a project in co-operation with An-Najah National University in Nablus, with which we have had co-operation since 1990;
2. Department of Political Science and the Institute for Human Rights. A conference on citizenship, democracy and human rights, in co-operation with Bethlehem University;
3. Institute for General Practice and Community Medicine. Non communicable diseases with focus on diabetes. The project, implemented in co-operation with Birzeit University, focuses on training and research;

4. Institute for General Practice and Community Medicine. Building competence in epidemiology in Palestine. In co-operation with Hebron University and the Ministry of Higher Education.

The last project, devoted to *Building competence in epidemiology in Palestine*, contains two parts: a research project with focus on health effects due to exposure to solvents in the working environment in the shoe industry, proposed by Dr. Awni Khatib, and a six-week course in project planning and epidemiological methods. It may serve as an example of co-operation which includes both a short- and a long-term perspective, providing for research, training and competence building. The short-term objectives concern procurement of advanced laboratory equipment and PCs. The long-term ones envisage long lasting research co-operation in advanced teaching and research. Competence building in epidemiology is of vital importance for planning a functional public health sector, as well as for describing the occurrence, aetiology and therapeutic possibilities of diseases.

The University of Oslo has now accepted two Palestinian PhD students in epidemiology under the «quota system», and a third has yet applied. Their research will be based on the comparative projects at Hebron and Birzeit universities. They will, as far as we know, be the first faculty members at PhD-level in epidemiology in Palestine, and the intention is to form a research and training centre in epidemiology in Palestine - linked to one of the universities.

The six-week course in Project Planning and Epidemiological Methods, which will be repeated annually for three years, will give basic knowledge in epidemiology to health institutions, hospitals, universities and health planners all over Palestine. During the course, the participants are planning epidemiological projects which will open for new research co-operation with the University of Oslo and new PhD-students. After some years, similar courses will be given by the Palestinians to the Palestinians, hopefully in a Palestinian State.

I will close these remarks by once again looking to the beginning of my own university. In those formative years, in a very poor country, the university proved that academic achievements in many fields are not primarily dependent on economic resources, but are first of all a result of active and free spirits and of the willpower and energy of dedicated human beings. This spirit that ran through the new Norwegian university and its intellectual surroundings in those days were profoundly strengthened by the national political revival that took place. And the growth of the university was at the same time an important part of the whole national building process. That is also the vital role of the Palestinian universities today.