



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
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Embassy of Switzerland
Swiss Cooperation Office in Jordan

Education

Swiss Cooperation Programme Middle East

'Building trust is a crucial
aspect of my work'

Swiss Cooperation Programme Middle East:

Switzerland works in the region focusing on four key themes:

- Protection & Migration
- **Education** & Income
- Conflict Prevention & Peace Promotion
- Water and Sanitation

Switzerland implements projects directly or works with Partner Organisations to implement projects, funds the UN to work on the key themes and sends Swiss Experts to Advise the UN.

SDC Direct Implementation: School rehabilitation

Since 2012, SDC has rehabilitated 88 public schools for Syrian refugee and affected host community school-age children in cooperation with the Ministry of Education in Jordan. One rehabilitation project amounts to CHF 100,000 per school – equalling roughly 3 per cent of the average cost for a new school building. Rehabilitation work focuses primarily on improving hygiene and safety in the school environment, including new sanitation facilities, waterproofing, mitigating safety risks and ensuring inclusive accessibility. The physical rehabilitation consists of one aspect under the Education portfolio and is complemented with work on the access to and quality of education for all children through projects with partners.



In 2020, access to education became a global issue when the COVID-19 pandemic forced many governments to temporarily close down schools and to shift to distance-learning modalities in an effort to contain the spread of the virus. However, millions of boys and girls around the world have had no, or only limited access to education and adequate education facilities, and children in Jordan are no exception. Many of the country's 3,600 public schools are run down and the problem has been exacerbated by the more than 650,000 Syrian refugees who have arrived in Jordan since the onset of the Syria crisis ten years ago. Experts from Switzerland's Humanitarian Aid Unit (SHA) have supported Jordan's Ministry of Education (MoE) in rehabilitating public schools hosting both Syrian refugee and affected host community school-age children since 2011. According to Jill Schmidheiny, Swiss architect and project manager based in Amman, the job goes far beyond just rehabilitating schools. We caught up with Jill to find out more about her work in Jordan.

Switzerland has supported Jordan's Ministry of Education in its efforts to rehabilitate school for almost ten years. Has this support borne fruit, and can you see an improvement?

Jill Schmidheiny: In Jordan, public school buildings are often not fit for use as safe learning spaces for children due to heavy overuse, vandalism and lack of maintenance. Sanitary units are in disrepair with insufficient or no running water, many facilities are heavily damaged, and fire and safety hazards prevail. Pre-existing challenges like low budget allocation to the education sector and overcrowded schools were apparent before and exacerbated by the Syria crisis. This is where the SDC comes in to support the government in creating safe, protective and learning-conducive environments for both Jordanian and Syrian students alike.

Construction work in Jordan is probably of a different standard than in Switzerland. What are the challenges?

J.S.: As anywhere else in the world, construction work is complex as you have to manage deadline constraints and tight budgets while maintaining quality. In Jordan, we work with contractors who belong to the lowest official grade, meaning they are generally unskilled and therefore in need of constant guidance on how to meet our standards. For me, this is both a major challenge and unique quality of our project approach. Working with the contractors and encouraging them to meet our quality level is only possible if they trust us, hence developing a good relationship with our partners is a crucial aspect of my work, which I really enjoy.

How do you build this trust and convince the contractors to work to your specifications?

J.S.: When problems arise, I resort to explaining why we need to ensure quality, sometimes by providing concrete scenarios of how failing to do so could affect their own children. Recently reported incidents in public schools include children being evacuated from the roof during a fire with locked escape routes, or a dislocated ceiling fan causing injuries. Although tragic, these examples help highlight not just 'what' – but 'why' – and can provide an incentive for contractors to improve their work. On the lighter side, keeping a good sense of humour helps relieve tension in even the most difficult negotiations.

Systemic vandalism and lack of maintenance are widespread in public infrastructure, so it becomes ever so important not just to finalise a project but to involve MoE actors on all levels in the project. We work closely with the authorities and use existing systems. My Jordanian colleague and I interact with MoE engineers on a daily basis who will take forth the knowledge of how to maintain quality and achieve full rehabilitation within a feasible budget. Although this does require constant coordination from our side, so far we have rehabilitated 88 schools in collaboration with the MoE, building not just safe and healthy school environments but also contributing to SDC's visibility.

I interpret success in our project not only by finalising our rehabilitation work, but rather by observing actors take initiative to further improve their surroundings.

Do you have an example?

J.S.: : Yes - challenging construction work was ongoing in a girls' school in Russaifah, Zarqa Governorate. However, the principal wanted a wall



painted in her office. It was a royal blue and she often wore blue clothes, leading me to think that she had originally chosen the colour. Although I firmly rejected her request, explaining that priority must be given to urgent work, she would insist that nothing made her unhappier than seeing the blue wall every day. Then she would move on to recite her long 'wish' lists written on post-it notes of all the work our project would not cover. This is a reoccurring situation, as school users often focus on beautification of what is closest to them physically and what will give them a sense of immediate improvement. Painting – although a priority for most principals – is never a priority for our work as we direct our limited funds towards infrastructure issues. That makes for a hard match, and the much-needed energy often goes towards constantly managing expectations.

When we returned to check on things after completion, I was surprised to see that her wall was suddenly beige. The principal seemed relaxed and told us that she had taken the matter into her own hands and hired a painter to do the job. She then reached for her post-it notes, which I was dreading, expecting to receive yet another wish list. Instead she asked for the plumber's telephone number for future reference.

Moments like these remain memorable to me. It is proof that your work pays as actors, who we have worked with intensively, take ownership and become part of the project. We can provide support and incentives, but self-initiative cannot be orchestrated. I believe it is an essential element and contributes to project sustainability.

You said that the schools' wish lists and the SDC's priorities usually don't match. Why?

J.S.: Differently than in other countries, public school premises are not necessarily considered a 'safe haven' here. They are often used as a platform for neighbouring communities to vent their frustrations against the government with targeted attacks on school property. This is why school users often request to have higher walls, a heavier gate or CCTV installed. Based on our experience, we take vandalism into consideration during our work, protecting facilities and making them easier to maintain, but we do not agree to heighten existing walls.

Why not?

J.S.: Because we believe the solution to dissatisfaction is linked to the overall need for decentralised decision-making, sometimes starting on community and school-level. It may sound like a contradiction, but in neighbourhoods where the gate is left open and schoolgrounds become public space, lower vandalism can be observed. Not an easy process overall, but the best security comes from within. SDC project priorities are directed to reinstating basic infrastructure, mitigating fire and safety hazards and providing inclusive access to the building.

How do you make sure the rehabilitation work you have done is being appreciated and maintained?

J.S.: In parallel to the MoE's efforts to address maintenance on a systemic level, we work jointly with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) on school-level on raising awareness of the importance of well-maintained surroundings. Once SDC rehabilitation is finished, the NRC supports the respective school during two

academic years. In this time, school management is encouraged to define needs, create an action plan and involve parents in their children's education. By means of specific trainings and guidance, teachers' and students' capacities are enhanced on subjects like hygiene awareness, bullying, violence and vandalism.

NRC reactivates existing school structures such as Parents-Teachers' Associations and Students' Councils, giving students, teachers and parents the chance to voice their opinions and ideas. If we get them on board and involve them, they feel empowered which can have a lasting effect on how they treat their schools.

Last but not least, how much has your work changed with the COVID-19 pandemic?

J.S.: The physical challenges might seem the most apparent, when travel between governorates was banned and access to our construction sites partially blocked. Less obvious, but just as impactful was the effect COVID-19-related school closures had on our counterparts' capacities at the MoE regarding immediate focus on remote learning and new procedures, overwhelmed staff and disconnected students. Government-imposed restrictions and lockdowns had an enormous strain on Jordan's economy, especially on day-workers and small businesses who are key actors in our construction projects. So, tensions were and remain high, and it goes without saying that it's good my colleague and I are experienced in navigating challenges in our daily work.

Jill has joined the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit (SHA) in 2014 and has worked in several countries such as Haiti, Nepal and Jordan. The ETH-Zurich-trained architect has been working for SHA's school rehabilitation in Jordan for two years. Under her management, fifteen schools have been rehabilitated while another five are currently under construction.



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