Algeria: Teaching about biodiversity

Algeria’s fast economic development and the strong growth of urban agglomerations are leading to drastic environmental pollution, the overuse of water resources, high volumes of refuse and rising levels of exhaust fumes. Yet respect for creation is firmly embedded in Islam, as in all of the other major world religions. This was the starting point for BMZ’s project for environmental management, which was launched in Algeria in 2007. In cooperation with Islamic authorities, the aim was to raise environmental awareness among the Algerian people in order to deal more effectively with environmental challenges. Since then, Islamic theologians of both genders have been addressing the subjects of environmental awareness and environmental protection in their Friday sermons to a broad section of the public. One example is the eastern Algerian city of Annaba with its 270,000 inhabitants, which was selected as a pilot region. Twenty imams and Qur’anic school teachers took part in a seven-day workshop that was organised for local representatives of the Algerian Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments and the city government. “Religious institutions and Islamic office-holders have grown in importance in recent years. In many places, these actors provide basic social services and thus contribute to poverty reduction, education and medical care,” says Peer Gatter, coordinator of the GIZ Programme Office for Intercultural Relations with Muslim Countries, which provides conceptual support to the programme. The organised workshop informed participants about national and international environmental problems and encouraged them to define shared values and perspectives. The event was

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a new experience for participants, both in terms of its format and content. They were given a new opportunity to put into practice the Qur’anic obligation of unity of word and deed in their mosques and Qur’anic schools, and to motivate believers to act in an environmentally friendly manner by addressing the themes of water, hygiene, refuse, green spaces and environmental education. The technical know-how had been missing before.

Many of the themes discussed at the workshop were then incorporated into a handbook for imams on the role played by mosques in defining our relationship with the environment. This handbook supports imams in preparing their Friday sermons (khutbah) on the subject of water and resource conservation. It was written by Islamic scholars and environmental experts, and was distributed on a large scale in 2011 among imams in Annaba Province. Bouabdallah Ghoualamalah, the Minister of Religious Affairs, made a personal effort to ensure the handbook was disseminated throughout the country. This gave rise to the network Green Hand, in which the imams developed an action plan designed to raise awareness of environmental protection issues among believers.

In 2010, a textbook was developed at Qur’anic schools on the theme of biodiversity. Therefore, the importance of the environment and of biodiversity was explained in an appropriate manner for Qur’anic school students and was underpinned by religious arguments. More than 30 imams and Qur’anic school teachers were trained in how to use the textbook and in suitable teaching methods. They now apply this knowledge in their lessons and on excursions, and pass it on to students. By the end of 2011, over 4,000 textbooks had been distributed at the roughly 120 Qur’anic schools in the city of Annaba. Apart from fostering a growing awareness of the need for environmental protection and the conservation of biodiversity in Annaba, this approach has also made a name for itself in other Muslim countries. “The textbook on biodiversity is now well known in Jordan, Morocco, Yemen, Pakistan and other countries, too,” Gatter points out. It is also meant to serve as a foundation for further projects in cooperation with religious office-holders. A regional exchange on this topic was initiated in Pakistan. BMZ supports this South-South cooperation.