

## Environmental Quality Services, Cairo

### The role of the private sector in local development – The Siwa experience

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#### 1. BACKGROUND OF SIWA

In Egypt's Western Desert lies the fertile depression of Siwa, an oasis inhabited by an indigenous community that has only recently emerged from centuries of isolation from the rest of the world. Located about 70 km east of the Libyan border and the largest oasis in Egypt, Siwa was also renowned in ancient times as one of the world's most important oracle centers. So much so, that Alexander the Great braved the dangers of the Sahara and traveled to Siwa on horseback to seek inspiration before he went on to conquer the world. Siwa possesses a unique natural environment with exceptional geo-morphological features, a diversity of habitats and living organisms, and some 230 natural freshwater springs fed by the Nubian aquifer. Occupying a surface of 1,125 km<sup>2</sup>, with a population of about 20,000, the oasis is made up of the town of Siwa and five villages. The population consists of approximately 47% women and 53% men, with 25% of the population residing in remote rural villages<sup>1</sup>. Its relative seclusion has allowed the Siwan community to maintain its unique cultural heritage and traditional practices.

The Siwans originate from the North African Berbers known as Amazigh<sup>2</sup>, considered "the true Western Desert indigenous people, who once roamed the North African coast between Tunisia and Morocco". The natives, inhabiting the area as early as 10,000 BC, have their own "language, traditions, rites, dress, decorations and tools, differing from those of the other Western Oases"<sup>3</sup>. Due to the remoteness of the oasis, Siwans have lived in isolation from the outside world over long periods of their history. Recent developments, however, such as the institution of local government in the early 1960s, the introduction of electricity in the late nineties and with it the introduction of television, and improvements in the road network connecting Siwa with other parts of Egypt, have served to link the oasis more closely with the outside world. These developments, have in some respect, resulted in the gradual replacement of traditional handicrafts and centuries-old systems for managing the environment, with modern but inappropriate technologies that have begun to erode Siwa's unique natural and cultural assets.

#### 1. EQI - ACTIVITIES IN SIWA

Environmental Quality International (EQI), a consulting company providing services in environment and natural resources, governance and enterprise development, has been privately investing in Siwa since 1997, engaging the Siwan community in every aspect and at every step of the process: project identification, implementation, and operation. EQI has implemented a series of community-based initiatives in Siwa that form a sustainable, private sector led development initiative, titled the Siwa Sustainable

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1 Framework for Sustainable Human Development in Siwa. Urban Management Programme's Regional Office for Arab States, 1999.

2 <http://www.siwasafari.com>

3 <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/siwahistory.htm>

Development Initiative, of which the activities are briefly described below. EQI has also worked towards improving solid waste management practices, restoring traditional building techniques; revitalizing indigenous handicraft; and promoting small enterprises as well as participating in the rehabilitation of Siwa's marketplace and selected historic sites.

Any developments achieved in Siwa rest on the mutual respect established between EQI and the Siwan tribes. This process has been a delicate one that has required an open and respectful approach to the community, its environment, and its culture. EQI has also maintained an open dialogue with the authorities, which proved to be extremely useful in reaching needed policy changes.

## **2. Siwa Sustainable Development Initiative**

### **1. ADRÈRE AMELLAL**

In 1997, EQI began the development of an ecolodge overlooking Lake Siwa and nestled at the foot of a mountain's cliff called Adrère Amellal (White Mountain in the native Siwa language). Traditional Siwan houses were restored and expanded using the same building styles and techniques that had been used in the oasis throughout the centuries. *Kershef*, a mixture of sun-dried salt rock mixed with clay, is used for wall building. This material maintains indoor temperatures at moderate levels, eliminating the need for air condition. In addition, natural ventilation has been adopted, taking advantage of the dry desert climate of the area. Ceilings are made of palm beams, while doors, windows and fixtures are made of olive wood from annual tree trimmings. Furnishing is simple, yet of the highest quality, drawing exclusively on local material and design. Accessories reflect the rich and colorful traditional handicrafts of the oasis. Contemporary plumbing is used throughout. Wastewater is first settled in self-contained sedimentation tanks, allowing the supernatant to flow through perforated pipes into a sealed wetland where indigenous papyrus plants are grown to complete the biodegradation and waste reduction process. Food prepared at the lodge is organically and predominantly locally grown.

### **2. SHALI LODGE**

On the other side of Lake Siwa lies the village of Siwa with its 13th-century-old enclave of Shali, a collection of once inhabited *Kershef* houses built side-by-side along steep, narrow and winding dirt roads. The enclave provided its inhabitants with protection from desert raiders. In recent times, heavy unusual rains damaged the salt-mud brick houses, leading the population to abandon Shali in search of more space, dismantling any building materials and fixtures they could rescue to erect new homes and leaving behind derelict structures. In the surrounding area of this historic enclave, EQI created another ecolodge parallel to the creation of Adrère Amellal. Shali Lodge is an 8-room lodge using the same construction materials and techniques as in Adrère Amellal.

### **3. SIWAN ARTISANSHIP DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE**

Siwa's cultural heritage includes a variety of unique arts and crafts, such as silver jewelry, colorful woven baskets, and embroidered and beaded garments and accessories. Girls learn sewing, embroidery and basketwork from their mothers and grandmothers. Overtime, many of these local crafts have deteriorated. The linkage of Siwa to the outside

world has led the younger generation of Siwans to perceive traditional crafts as old fashioned and backward. The pressure to produce saleable items that appeal to the modern woman, coupled with the lack of access to good quality raw materials have resulted in the production of mediocre items that rely on artificial dyes and synthetic materials.

In August 2001, EQI launched the Siwa Women's Artisanry Development Initiative as a community development intervention designed to increase the empowerment and economic self-sufficiency of Siwan women through the revitalization of traditional handicraft production and the promotion of a culture of artisanry. The project has focused on opening up viable business opportunities for Siwan women and enhancing their skills to ensure that their workmanship is of the highest standard. The project has provided home-based business opportunities for a total of over 300 Siwan women (including part-time and temporary artisan women), who are applying their embroidery skills to a line of garments, accessories, and household items that are exported to Europe and being through shops in Cairo and in Siwa.

#### 4. PARTICIPATORY ART EVENTS

In November 2003, a land art event was organized by EQI and a London art dealer, in collaboration with members of the local community. The internationally celebrated artist Cai Guo Qiang, renowned for his creative integration between culture and art, as well as for his spectacular use of gunpowder in art extravaganzas, was chosen to stage the event, which was funded by an international group of art patrons and the Prince Klaus Foundation. Over a period of five days, patrons, artists and international media representatives gathered in the oasis to observe Cai stage a kite-flying activity over town, temple, desert and mountain top. The artist worked with over 350 school children to decorate 600 silk kites in the shapes of eyes, eagles, and men. Using brushes and their hands, the children enthusiastically painted the kites in bright primary colors. Forty of the children then flew the heavy 5x5 silk kites over sites of historical and cultural significance in Siwa. In addition to engaging the school children in a process of artistic self-expression, the project gave visitors the opportunity to contribute to and learn from an oasis community with a rich and unique cultural heritage, and Siwans the opportunity to contribute to and learn from the outside world.

The second Siwa Art project took place October 23<sup>rd</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005. The famous Russian artists, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov displayed a work of "installation art" in participation with the Siwan community. A boat made out of reed and palm leaf was launched onto Zeitoun Lake in Siwa. The children of the community had a strong part in the creation of the boat by painted the squares of fabric that hoisted the sails. The actual boat was constructed through a combined effort of builders, artists and other patrons from all over Europe and The States along with members of the local community.

#### **ADDITIONAL EQI ACTIVITIES IN SIWA ARE LISTED BELOW:**

##### *1. Two Springs Restoration*

Two of Siwa's most famous ancient Roman springs, Cleopatra's Bath and Fatnas, had been tiled using modern ceramics that robbed the springs of their historic value and clashed with the cultural setting of the oasis. EQI was asked to remedy the situation. EQI

mobilized its team of Siwan master builders and craftsmen, and restored the springs within a period of two weeks. Working day and night to keep the water continuously pumped out of the wells, the workers removed the ceramic tiles and encased each spring with stone from a mountain in the oasis.

## *2. Solid Waste Management Design*

The primary objective of this activity was to support the efforts of the Government of Egypt in operating its solid waste management strategy at the local level. The project sought to develop a long-term, comprehensive strategy for SWM in Siwa; and to demonstrate rapid impact through the implementation of a pilot project that would serve as a replicable model for sustainable solid waste management in Egypt's remote areas.

## *3. Plastic Bag Substitution Initiative*

Plastic bag carriers seemed to pose significant environmental dangers in Siwa as livestock often swallowed them, choking on them and sometimes dying as a result. In addition, it was revealed during interviews that many Siwans burned their waste, including plastic bags. The burning of plastic bags emits noxious fumes harmful to humans. Siwans seemed also to have been sensitized to the fact that they need to maintain a pristine desert environment if they are to continue to attract tourism and bring new business to Siwa. Plastic bags were being carried by the wind all around Siwa and the surrounding desert was becoming an eyesore for residents and tourists alike. The first pilot project thus consisted of an initiative to develop environmentally friendly substitutes for plastic carrier bags that would be culturally acceptable to the Siwans and at the same time cost-effective.

## *4. Siwa City Consultations*

EQI organized a consultation in the oasis of Siwa that brought together representatives of all stakeholders in the community to identify and explore critical issues affecting Siwa's development and to develop an action plan that addressed these concerns. The consultation provided an opportunity to synergize and coordinate ongoing efforts and future investments in order to guarantee the sustainability of Siwa's development.

## *5. Canada Fund for Local Initiatives*

The Canada Fund for Local Initiatives is a special Fund from CIDA for small-scale local initiatives projects. The aim of the Canada Fund is to finance small, grassroots, and community run projects that provide economic, educational, technical and/or social development assistance to local communities in Egypt. The Fund aims to respond to pressing needs in local communities to improve living conditions. EQI was responsible for: identifying and appraising projects and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with strong initiative for local development that may benefit substantially in terms of economic and/or social development from the CF Program; as well as providing technical and administrative support to NGOs both in the design and implementation phase of the projects.

## **5. Vision for Siwa Initiative**

EQI's vision for Siwa is to continue to work at developing it into a hub for sustainable development upon which it can become a model and an inspiration for destinations all over the world. EQI believes that the spirit of entrepreneurship at the smallest scale is what has preserved the cities of the region for centuries as thriving centers for world trade, finance and culture; and that this spirit is the region's best hope for prosperity in today's economy. As such, the company continues to invest in innovative ventures that channel this spirit towards sustainable development. EQI continues to use its own resources, as well as seeking additional investment partners with the same guiding principles, to invest in the sustainable development of the oasis as well as other areas in the region. At present EQI, in consultation with the Siwan community, and in partnership with the International Finance Cooperation (IFC), is expanding its activities under the Siwa Sustainable Development Initiative to include: the restoration of dilapidated homes in the historic village of Shali; establishing sustainable agriculture practices throughout the oasis by training farmers on proper farming techniques, enhancing the skills of the Siwan artisans and linking them with the rest of the world through their products; as well as initiating a renewable energy initiative through a biogas pilot project.