September, 2008

Sustainable Desert Community (SDC)

Project Update

This is the first in a series of project updates which will be produced periodically in order to keep our partners, funders, supporters and friends informed about developments in this exciting initiative involving a Bedouin community in the Negev desert in Israel.

The project’s intention, to briefly recall, is to develop and demonstrate a sustainable, self-sufficient, community-based enterprise, sensitive to Bedouin cultural traditions and adapted to the conditions of an arid region. The project combines Bedouin aspirations, values, experience, and interest in agriculture, with sustainable, cutting edge approaches to desert agriculture, alternative energy production, near zero waste design, and innovative land stewardship practices.

The project will focus on developing an integrated organic farming operation involving livestock, dairy and fiber products as well as indigenous vegetables, native medicinal plants, tourism, and sale of Bedouin craft items. Job creation, including employment opportunities for women, will be a primary goal, as will be community capacity building. Further to its underlying economic purpose, the site will function as a research and knowledge center serving the broader neighboring community as an ongoing source of empowerment and training.

Development Highlights

- Following an intensive period of formulation and early preparation, a formal planning effort was launched on August first. The goal of the planning phase is to develop, over the next year, a full project document to include a detailed project narrative, a physical master plan, an economic feasibility, and an implementation plan.

A Project Development Team is now in place and working intensively. It comprises individuals with responsibilities for functional components of the project as follows:

  - Yunes Alnabari and Dr. Shaher Almakawi are responsible for the livestock operation. They are developing all relevant aspects of the plan including the choice of animals, size of herds, fodder production, range of products, pens and processing plant requirements, and the like.
Ali Alhawashle, an expert on indigenous plants, is working on plans for cultivating desert medicinal plants. He is working on selecting the appropriate species, defining the necessary areas for cultivation, addressing watering issues and developing the necessary plans for the related products mix.

Ali Abu Alckian, is responsible for all aspects of community development. Together with a community group he is working on developing the community’s declaration of principles, defining the appropriate boundaries for the community, strategies for community empowerment and development, and the role of women in the project’s community.

Aatef Abu Agag is responsible for developing the cooperative structure. He is examining various options, approaches and modalities for organizing an effective collective and is interfacing with the consultants working on the economic feasibility. He is also acting as manager of the project’s office.

Isaac Meir heads the team of researchers from the Blaustein Desert Research Institute of the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. An integral part of the project team, this group is responsible for developing the physical master plan, addressing issues of soil improvement, cultivation of fodder and tree planting, and designing the buildings, utilities and technology infrastructure of the site.

Dr. Mohammed Alnabari and Dr. Michael Ben-Eli facilitate the working of the Project Development Team. Members of the team meet every Sunday, work separately or in groups in between, and come together as a whole group for a joint one work week, every month.

During early September, a Project Steering Committee was established. Members include: Prof. Jimmy Weinblatt, Rector, Ben-Gurion University (BGU); Ibrahim Al Atrash, Chariman, Association of Herd Growers from the Unrecognized Villages; Amal Elsana Alh’jooj, Director, Arab-Jewish Center for Equality, Empowerment and Cooperation (AJEEC); Dr. Mohammed Alnabari, Mayor of Hura; Dr. Michael Ben-Eli, Director, The Sustainability Laboratory; Mr. Eyal Hayun, Bedouin Commission, Israel Land Authority.

Other items:

A project office has been established at the Hura Library and a project secretary, Gadir Hanni, joined the project team.
The Negev Institute for Peace and Development Strategies, (NISPED), a local NGO long active in the Bedouin community, has been retained as the financial administrator for the project. NISPED’s accountant, Ahmad Eyaid, will manage all disbursements and issue periodic financial reports. Pledged contributions, secured thanks to Bob Arnow’s tireless efforts, are being deposited in a dedicated project account established by NISPED for the SDC project.

Magdi Alasibi, an economist, and Joel Siegel, a development planner, have joined the planning effort. They will conduct the necessary analysis to ensure the economic feasibility of the project.

The statutory planning process has been launched and plans are being prepared for review by the Israel Land Authority.

The possibility of getting a temporary lease for the site, while the statutory planning process unfolds, is being investigated. If approved, it will make possible actual work on soil enhancement and early planting, to commence early next year.

Meetings commenced between members of the project team and members of Kibbutz Kramim to plan the necessary operations of growing organic fodder on agricultural land made available for the purpose by the Kibbutz.

Preliminary plans for live stock operations and for growing medicinal plants have been presented to the full project team. Preliminary sizing of all functions on the site has been completed.

A new initiative is being developed with Mariam Abu Rakayek, for cultivating indigenous edible plants from rare, old seeds still kept by some local tribes. The concept is for growing such plants on the site, creating a seed bank of an important diminishing resource, and working with women of the surrounding villages to cultivate nutritional gardens on family plots.

The first meeting of the Project Steering Committee took place on September 8th at the office of Prof. Jimmy Weinblatt, Rector of BGU. At the request of Members of the project team, the Rector accepted to serve as Chairman of the committee.
Discussions with regional management of the Jewish National Fund are under way for possible areas of collaboration. The agency is expressing interest in providing access to its green houses for the first round of seeding of medicinal plants, donating tree saplings, and assisting in fencing the site.

**Photo Gallery**

Project team members, government officials and BGU researchers on a visit to the project site.

Ali Alhawashle and Dr. Michael Ben-Eli examining desert medicinal plants.

First meeting of the Steering Committee at the office of BGU Rector, Prof. Jimmy Weinblatt.

Planning Meeting with Mariam Abu Rakayek (left) at her home town Tel Sheva.
Yunes Alnabari (center right), presenting plans for goats and sheep raising operation at a Project Team meeting, in Sede Boqer.

Meeting of the Community Development Group, chaired by Ali Abu Alckian (third from right).

Meeting of the full Project Advisory Forum in Hura.

Isaac Meir (near board) leads discussion of a Project Team meeting in Hura.

Dr. Mohammed Alnabari, Mayor of Hura, reviews site features, during a Project Team meeting.
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