Arab States • Egypt

Siwa Sustainable Development Initiative

Prepared by • Tarek Hatem (Egypt)
Sector • Ecotourism
Enterprise Class • Local SME
Summary

Environmental Quality International (EQI) is a private consulting firm, based in Cairo and founded in 1981, providing services in environment and natural resources, governance and enterprise development. In 1998, EQI began privately investing in the oasis of Siwa through a series of community-based initiatives that formed a private-sector led development initiative, called the Siwa Sustainable Development Initiative. Emphasis is placed on employing local workers, applying traditional systems of building and environmental management and using local materials and local agricultural products. In Siwa, EQI has a portfolio of enterprises that include three lodges, a women’s artisanship initiative, organic farming and production programmes, as well as community art projects. These initiatives have created many employment and income-generating opportunities. Seventy-five Siwans are currently employed full-time in EQI’s enterprises in Siwa. On average, each month around 300 to 320 Siwans are provided with income-generating opportunities in fields including the supply of raw materials, production of furniture and handicrafts, organic agriculture, traditional Siwan building trades and transportation of goods.

Positive Outcomes for the Poor

- In a location with limited economic activities, the Siwa Initiative offers full-time employment to 75 Siwans, and an average of 300 to 320 Siwans are provided with income-generating opportunities. Employees are provided on-the-job training and EQI has also implemented several donor-funded training programs, particularly in the fields of organic agriculture and traditional Siwan embroidery
- Siwan women are given opportunities to earn income in circumstances acceptable to the community’s social and traditional norms. Such opportunities had been very limited in the past, due to the lack of mobility for women in a highly conservative society
- In order to facilitate financial services to the Siwan community, EQI helped bring the first bank to Siwa. EQI financed and constructed the building in traditional Siwan style and arranged for Banque du Caire to establish a branch in Siwa
- EQI financed, constructed and donated to the community two local buildings using traditional Siwan building methods and materials. These buildings include a library, a cinema, an area for displaying children’s art, as well as craft stores, a restaurant and a social gathering area
- Through financing from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and working with the local community, EQI established the Siwa Poverty Reduction & Enterprise Development Fund with the objective of supporting the development of small and micro-enterprises
- EQI’s Siwa Sustainable Development Initiative works in accordance with Siwan values, principles and culture. EQI has helped preserve indigenous architecture and building

---

1 These numbers indicate the number of individuals who receive income each month; it does not imply that they are different individuals each month.
techniques, its premises respect the surrounding nature, and its agricultural activities are organic and pesticide-free
- EQI helped facilitate the involvement of the HOPE health program to provide medical support for Siwans
- EQI has been working closely with the Friends of Siwa Association and the local authorities to raise awareness of the importance of protecting the non-renewable groundwater resources of the Oasis

**Challenges**
- The geographic location of Siwa Oasis leads to increased costs and complicated logistics due to the isolation and inaccessibility of the Oasis
- Working and building trust with local community members who share common values but have different cultures and traditions proved to be difficult
- Complications were faced when working with NGOs, local authorities and the Egyptian government, as well as during the coordination of partnership activities
- Ensuring the overall environmental sustainability of the Oasis, especially with regard to the use of water, offered many challenges

**Key Innovations**
- A holistic approach to development that includes employment, income-generation activities, cultural and artistic preservation, organic agriculture and preservation of the balance of the human and natural ecosystem was central to the Initiative
- Working in close partnership with the local community, donors, investors, international artists and visitors, the government and development NGOs allowed the programme to flourish
- Preservation of the kershef techniques of architecture with local salt rock materials encouraged skill building, employment, and historical and cultural awareness

**Opportunities for Replication & Scaling Up**
- Over the years, EQI has expanded its activities in Siwa, creating additional employment and income generating opportunities in the community
- EQI is working to identify locations in Egypt and the region that would be suitable for other sustainable development initiatives that follow the same guiding principles
- The Siwa Initiative can be adapted in other desert environments and can be a source of inspiration and confidence for others seeking to replicate their sustainable business model and approach