

HISTORY, CULTURE, AND IFC ASSISTANCE – PROMOTING WOMEN’S INCOME GENERATION IN SIWA OASIS

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Seven hundred miles from Cairo, the Siwa Oasis is located close to the Libyan border in Egypt's Western Desert. Alexander the Great came through here in 331 BC for a consultation with the Oracle of Amun. The remote Oasis was connected to the rest of Egypt only when an asphalt road was built in the 1980s, linking Siwa and Marsa Matruh. Siwa's solitary location has allowed Siwans to maintain their way of life and to preserve their Siwi language. Still today, Siwa is typically reached after a long 8-hour car ride through the desert. Yet it has recently welcomed internationally famous guests, including the Prince of Wales and Queen Paola of Belgium. Among others, the attraction is an IFC-supported Sustainable Local Development Project implemented by Environmental Quality International (EQI) that includes ecotourism, sustainable agriculture, women's artisanship, and renewable energy.

Dr. Mounir Neamatalla, President of EQI, a Cairo-based private sector firm, chose Egypt's Siwa Oasis as a unique location to implement the local sustainable development project. The IFC-supported project will have two levels of development impact: (1) At the macro level, the project aims to demonstrate that development initiatives can successfully be undertaken by the private sector and that the private sector has a role to play even at the grass-roots level of development; and (2) at the micro level, the project aims to empower Siwa's population, promote entrepreneurship, and help preserve the delicate environmental and cultural balance of a threatened ecosystem.

IFC's contributions to the project include US\$880,000 in loans and US\$468,000 in advisory services grants. The majority of the funds (US\$643,000) come from the Environmental Business Finance Program (EBFB), a GEF-funded, IFC-managed program. The Grassroots Business Initiative supports the project with a US\$237,000 loan, and PEP-MENA provided US\$175,000 in advisory services to the project's women's artisanship component, which is the focus of this "Smart Lesson."



The oracle of Siwa confirmed Alexander the Great as both a divine personage and the legitimate Pharaoh of Egypt during a visit made prior to his campaign of conquest in Persia. (Wikipedia)

Lesson #1: We need to ensure that both women and men directly benefit from IFC-supported interventions, especially when the project takes place in a cultural context where physical gender segregation is the norm.

While the initial components of the Siwa development initiative were going to create employment in several sectors (eco-tourism, farming, construction, etc.), it was also clear that, given the cultural context of Siwa, only men would be able to earn income from these opportunities. How would the initiative be able to also support women's income-generating activities, when Siwan women typically do not leave the home once married? Even younger, unmarried girls would not easily mix with men in the workplace.

In the past, women were known for their intricate embroidery skills, yet Siwan embroidery had become almost extinct, as only a few older Siwan women had the skills – and some of them now had too poor eyesight to

perform such work. Moreover, how would they pass on their knowledge if only a few younger women had expressed an interest in learning? What was needed was an environment conducive to teaching embroidery skills, where women could come together without overstepping cultural gender barriers.

The initiative began to work with a group of about 50 women who were provided training by their elders in traditional Siwan embroidery techniques. The incentives for the young women to learn were primarily the opportunities to regularly socialize in a group of peers as well as to obtain a training stipend. Siwa's embroidered products began to gain a market value and generate earnings for the women. News spread quickly through the towns, and a great demand emerged not only for the training, but also for the opportunity to work in the embroidery workshops.



EQI, in partnership with IFC, addressed this demand by training 300 unmarried Siwan girls in 12 different locations throughout Siwa. The training took place at the married women's homes. Each group was led by one trainer (married) and one training assistant (unmarried). Prevalent illiteracy among the trainees meant there was no need for course books and written materials. Much of the success of the training depended on the head coordinator, who oversaw the implementation of the training. She was assisted by 12 women in charge of training administration that included organization, supervision, distribution of embroidery samples, and accounting. Professionalized, quality-controlled embroidery production would be ensured through continuous learning and training of trainers.

Lesson #2: The women's artisanship component had to be an integral part of the overall development initiative, leveraging other project components such as ecotourism.

There must be millions of women's embroidery initiatives around the world. Most of them have a micro-enterprise character with the challenge of reaching local (let alone international) markets, thus making it difficult for such businesses to successfully scale up. How would this women's artisanship initiative be different? EQI's upscale "Adrère Amellal Ecologne" and the IFC co-financed hotel in the surrounding area of the Shali Fortress



attracted many eco-tourists who are interested in buying traditional high-quality souvenirs from Siwa. The premises of "Adrère Amellal" include a beautiful store where embroidered products are sold to mostly high-end international tourists. Another store will be opened in the hotel nearby Shali Fortress, centrally located at downtown Siwa's main intersection.

The women's artisanship initiative has also benefited from visits of famous tourists. Italian haute-couture designer Tony Scervino, a frequent visitor to Siwa, immediately took a liking to the intricate Siwan embroidery stitch, and designer models of the Ermanno Scervino Designer House in Italy have been showing off the Siwa Scervino line at catwalks in Milan. The word about the fashionable design that integrates embroidery by the women of Siwa was further spread when CNN and the BBC featured entire programs on how Italian women were proud to wear the Siwan embroidered haute-couture designer line. The story is a win-win situation: tourists make the products embroidered by women internationally fashionable and contribute to their demand; and the media coverage surrounding the famous Siwa-inspired fashion designs further increases an international interest in visiting the Oasis.

One of the visible successes of the Sustainable Local Development Initiative is that it offers a suite of products that can be marketed as a package. Rather than buying just a jar of olives for the evening salad, consumers are interested in purchasing - with the taste of olives - the overall spirit of the Siwa Oasis. The message that

the products originate from an exotic place, with environmentally friendly production and from a company that supports women opens up new market opportunities for the Siwa product line. For example, EQI is currently taking steps to attractively package products of the initiative's sustainable agriculture component (including its high-end olive oil, olive paste/tapenade, jams, and salad dressing, etc.) using textile pieces embroidered by women that further enhance the message of an integrated product line approach.

Lesson #3: Measuring development impact is key - not only for the success of the artisanship component in Siwa, but also for scaling up and for its replicability elsewhere.

Under the women's artisanship component, 300 women would be trained. How would that make a difference to them or their families? Was the initiative really going to empower the beneficiaries, or would women's economic activities "upset" existing gender relations in the family?

The IFC team at an early stage of project implementation suggested that a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework would involve setting up a control group of women who would not benefit from the women's artisanship initiative. In September 2005, baseline information was gathered from 60 women who would benefit from the artisanship project, and 60 who would not. A still ongoing qualitative survey was also designed in February 2006 that was given to the women as they completed their training, so as to obtain information on training quality and relevance.

More than half of the survey questionnaires have been analyzed, and preliminary findings indicate that the typical trainee is 18-25 years old, unmarried, and without children. The majority of the trainees had some primary education, but about 25 percent had none. When asked, "What do you do (or would you do) with the money you earn?", 60 percent of the trained women – all of whom also received a small training stipend – responded that they would contribute to household expenses, and 40 percent indicated that they would purchase personal items for themselves (such as wedding trousseaus and accessories).

***Direct Quote:** To Basma, the Siwa Artisanship project has represented an alternative opportunity to acquire economic independence: "I neither got an education, nor am I married yet. But I now have a profession that I can rely on to complete my life."*

While it is too early to report impacts, anecdotal evidence suggests that the project has been a success. Women report that the training is offering them new opportunities. Forty women are already producing for export, and others are eager for the construction of additional (partly IFC financed) workshops to be completed so that they can continue to apply their recently acquired skills. Men have also shown their support for the initiative, with many asking for training opportunities for their daughters and sisters. Some of the women also shared that the training has promoted a social space where women can regularly come together and discuss issues pertaining to the community at large. A third set of questionnaires is being designed to evaluate the impact of the training on women's ability to generate income and how that affects decision-making within the household, as well as women's entrepreneurial spirit. The impact assessment will be completed 6 months after project completion (September 2007).

Lesson #4: Convey the benefits of a comprehensive M&E framework to the client from the very beginning of the project.

For IFC, M&E has become an integral part of its work that helps demonstrate to its shareholders and donors that utilized funds are generating greater public good. From EQI's initial perspective, however, the implementation of M&E translated into additional reporting work and expenses that, from the client's point of view, should be covered by the development organization, not the private sector firm. In retrospect, the IFC team should have been clearer on reporting requirements as part of the investment and advisory services negotiations and should have emphasized how exactly M&E would benefit the client. Such information would also have helped the client include M&E in its implementation plan and budget.

Today, EQI is grateful that a rigorous M&E framework was put in place. It has already helped *Siwa Creations*, EQI's brand name for the Siwan fashion line, professionalize its women's artisan operations. There is now a database that includes information on all beneficiaries, the training they have taken, and the products they have produced and sold. The process has also enabled *Siwa Creations* to have easily accessible operational information at their fingertips: *Siwa Creations'* staff can retrieve information related to its production capacity,

costs, and revenues – all essential for an efficient and effective business. Moreover, the ability to report on development impacts has contributed to EQI being seen as a credible private sector partner for development. The 11th International Business Forum, organized by the World Bank Institute and the German Business Group, featured the Siwa Sustainable Local Development Initiative in one of its case studies on “Business and the Millennium Development Goals.” In 2006, EQI was awarded the World Business Award by the International Chamber of Commerce and the United Nations Development Programme for its development initiative in Siwa.

Lesson #5: The search for international market niches has to continue to ensure that women (and men) have sustainable income-generating opportunities.

As part of IFC’s advisory services package, EQI was able to benefit from an international fair trade (IFAT) assessment with the idea that IFAT (or similar) certification would further distinguish the Siwa products in the international market. As a result of the IFAT assessment, some recommendations have already been successfully translated into action. For example, IFAT-required safety regulations were taken into consideration in the construction of artisanship workshops as well as the olive and date factories. IFAT certification is also based on fair pay and provision of socially acceptable remuneration (in the local context), taking into account the principle of equal pay for equal work by women and men. Following the IFAT assessment, EQI plans to document its approach to negotiating with the producers.



In closing, the following characteristics have contributed to the project’s success:

- IFC’s global expertise (such as on international fair trade) leverages local skills and knowledge.
- Investments and advisory services go hand in hand.
- The community has realized social benefits that are also profitable for the private sector.
- Cultural preservation and environmental sustainability further promote product marketability.

For more information on the Siwa Local Development Initiative, visit: <http://www.eqi.com.eg>

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