

Planeterra Foundation Supports Sustainable Development with Innovative Partnerships in Egypt

By: Laura Carroll

Egypt currently faces a critical moment: the first free democratic election in the country's history, and the first opportunity for its citizens to choose a leader since the fall of Mubarak in January 2011. It is a moment fraught with tension, and the outcome of the next few weeks will profoundly affect Egypt's future. Whatever the result of the election, however, the transition of power is not an end in itself. Rather, it is an initial step in the long road of nation building that lies ahead.

During the past year, I had the honor of working with the Planeterra Foundation in Egypt as part of my graduate studies in Sustainable International Development at Brandeis University. As I researched local NGOs, I was struck by the weakness of Egypt's civil society. Though there are thousands of registered organizations in Egypt, only a fraction of them are active. Egypt's NGO laws are among the most restrictive in the world, and civil organizations face frequent intrusions by the Egyptian government. As a result, most Egyptians had no real way of organizing to create social or political change until the time of the revolution, and the concept of self-organization remains relatively new. This lack of a developed civil society has hampered the country's growth significantly, and following the installation of the new government it is a key issue to be addressed.

During this difficult transitional period, the Planeterra Foundation is seizing the revolutionary moment by partnering with local charitable organizations in Egypt. At a time when most aid organizations are halting operations until the transition is complete, Planeterra is beginning three new projects in Egypt to reduce poverty, improve education, and preserve fragile ecosystems during this critical period of time. Through cooperation with leading travel company G Adventures, Planeterra is able to harness not only travelers' donations to support its projects, but also the power of the tourism industry itself.

In Egypt, each of the three new projects has been set up with both a small-scale grant from Planeterra and a link to the G Adventures supply chain. One project, outside of Luxor, consists of a community center with a small women's sewing cooperative. Through a grant from Planeterra, the cooperative was able to purchase new sewing machines and hire a professional trainer to broaden their skills. Through the link with G Adventures, the women will have a guaranteed buyer for a portion of their work, as the travel company will soon begin providing tote bags produced by the cooperative as welcome gifts for each passenger on its tours. With the combined support of Planeterra and G Adventures, the cooperative will be able to grow, providing the village women with independent income and lifting several households out of poverty. Nearby, in the village of El Todd, Planeterra is supporting a bilingual library for a

community education center, where G Adventures travelers will have an opportunity to visit and enjoy a locally-prepared meal. Finally, in the remote mountains of the Sinai, Planeterra is supporting the restoration of traditional Bedouin gardens, which travelers will also have the opportunity to visit through new hiking itineraries being designed by the G Adventures team.

Each one of these projects, with the combined support of small grants and links to the travel economy, contributes to the sustainable development of Egypt in different and complementary ways. Moreover, by forming long-term partnerships with locally-run charitable organizations to implement each project, Planeterra is developing the capacity of local institutions, a critical step towards the development of a more robust civil society in a country where civil engagement is only beginning to emerge. As Egypt chooses its new leader and moves forward, it will need to harness the energy of the thousands of people who flooded Tahrir during the revolution. Any contribution that we can make towards helping Egyptians help themselves is a step in the right direction.