



Green Economy Initiatives ("GEI") in the 'Good Water Neighbors' Network of Communities

Final Program Report

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General Project Description

EcoPeace Middle East is a regional environmental organization promoting peacebuilding and the protection of the environment. Because all residents of our region are dependent on shared and limited environmental resources, and all residents are impacted by the conflict's consequences on the region's environment, regional cooperation is required to reach these aims. Water and environmental issues are inherently trans-boundary regional issues, making the twin aims of building peace and protecting the environment interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

The "**Green Economy Initiatives**" project aimed to demonstrate the financial value of cross-border and "green" enterprises for local communities; to create incentives for small-business cooperation between Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian entrepreneurs; and show that local, national, and regional efforts to protect shared environmental resources is essential for, among other reasons, contributing to economic growth.

Overall objectives of this project were to:

1. Contribute to peace-making by advancing cross-border cooperation between businesses and between local communities and their leaderships; and to
2. Demonstrate that local, national, and regional efforts to protect shared environmental resources produce concrete benefits, such as contributing to economic growth.

Specific objectives of this project were to:

1. Demonstrate the financial value of cross-border cooperation and "green" enterprises for local communities by assisting existing "green economy" enterprises to expand and achieve economic sustainability and bring greater livelihood opportunities to local communities.
2. Create opportunities for small/medium-business cooperation between Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians that further contributes to the development of sustainable livelihoods in local communities.
3. Help to build diverse constituencies, especially youth and women entrepreneurs, in support of cross-border solutions to prioritized local environmental problems; Empowering local municipalities and adult residents to work for cross-border environmental cooperation that protects or rehabilitates local resources and promotes shared solutions to sanitation and other cross-border water issues.

Summary Description of all Work Performed

The **Green Economy Initiative** project was EcoPeace Middle East's first attempt at creating opportunities for small business cooperation between Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians that could bring about economic benefits not only to the business enterprise itself, but to the targeted area's local communities as well. The project focused on the geographic areas of the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea and the Mateh Yehuda Regional Council / West Bethlehem communities.

The project first hired **3 business consultants** - Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian – who mapped out the 'green businesses' in their respective countries. They then proposed regional business scenarios - in the form of tourism itineraries - that included selected themes and sectors, i.e. adventure tourism, food industry, women's initiatives, etc. that would make a strong business case for cross-border cooperation.

Cross-border tours and seminars were held for Tour Guides and Tour Operators so they could visit the chosen local "green businesses" and also to other regional water and environmental sites. Tour guides learned about local "green entrepreneurs", and developed network contacts with fellow entrepreneurs. These tours, together with business consultant-led seminars, resulted in the development of **4 "sellable" cross border tourism itineraries**: (1) Cross border bicycle tour "Pedaling Coexistence"; (2) Cross border hiking itinerary in the Northern Jordan Valley area; (3) Cross border hiking itinerary in the Jordan Valley and Dead Sea areas; and a (4) Cross border touring itinerary entitled "Nature, Culture and Water".

Tour Operators who were involved in the development of the itineraries, and with the assistance of a professional marketing consultant, developed **marketing** plans and strategies; these included production of brochures, internet sites, Facebook pages, advertisements, and a week-long, on-site "Familiarization" (FAM) tour - an important marketing tool whereby tour agencies send representatives to actually experience portions of the proposed tours.

Additional **cross-border partnerships** were also pursued between tour operators, tour guides and project entrepreneurs following the above mentioned tours and seminars, i.e. one-day tours for Israeli groups to Jericho, Israeli Adventure Tour company now partnering with the Palestinian Tourism department in Beit Sahur – already implementing rappelling activities in Mar Saba, Auja and Battir, and more.

Also, throughout the project, **one-day youth seminars** were conducted in each of our 3 EcoParks; in Auja, Palestine, in Ein Gedi, Israel, and in Sharhabil bin Hassneh in Jordan. Youth received the environmental education program offered at each Park, and learned how the development of "Green Economy" initiatives can contribute to cross border opportunities in the region.

Staff trainings were conducted for all EcoPark staff, given by the more experienced staff from our Jordanian EcoPark, to staff from Auja and Ein Gedi. Topics covered included management, hospitality and services training, safety and first aid skills, informal education trainings and nature guiding.

Development Projects were built in all 3 Eco Parks to exemplify the capacity to attract "green" tourism and partner with "green" entrepreneurs in the area while also augmenting each ecocenter's permanent facilities and programs. These included installing adventure tourism facilities such as rappelling (in Jordan); a large mudbuilding structure for use by the local women's groups (in Auja); and an aquaponics garden (in Ein Gedi) as the basis for a community garden.

Finally, **Cross Border Eco-Fairs** were held at the conclusion of the project, with participation of cross border municipal representatives and tourism departments in the region; Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian, as well as many vendors and tour guides who participated in the project. **At both events - and with high level government officials presiding - the project was praised for bringing together people from the region in this innovative cross-border ecotourism initiative.**

Results Achieved (as measured by performance indicators & relative to targets)

Tour Guides and Tour Operators who participated in the "GreenLines" tours communicated their deep satisfaction with learning about the environmental and water challenges in a regional context, as well as being given the opportunity to meet and interact with their peers across the border.

Tour Operators that participated in the **Business related Regional Tours and Seminars** also expressed their satisfaction with the cross border interactions, the common learning experience, and foresee good business opportunities from the cross border partnerships and itineraries developed.

- ✓ Feedback forms stated that **88% of participants understood that "green economy initiatives" can contribute to sustainable development in the Middle East – surpassing our target of 80%.**
- ✓ Feedback forms stated that **85% of participants gained knowledge about shared environmental and water issues and are motivated to furthering cross-border green economy initiatives, surpassing our target of 80%.**
- ✓ **4 "sellable" cross border itineraries resulted from the Regional Tours and Seminars.** Each itinerary includes visits to a variety of sites in all 3 countries; they have been developed together by Tour Operators from all 3 countries; and they support many local 'green' initiatives that had been visited in the tours held throughout the project, directly benefitting the local populations.
 1. Cross border Bicycle Tour entitled "Pedaling Coexistence"
 2. Cross border Hiking itinerary in the Northern Jordan Valley area
 3. Cross border Hiking itinerary in the Jordan Valley and Dead Sea areas
 4. Cross border Touring itinerary entitled "Nature, Culture and Water"

Tour Operators expressed their belief that these cross-border itineraries are attractive, and that the cross-border element is what gives the 'added value'. They expect to benefit from good sales. The itineraries were designed using the business plans (itineraries) developed by the business consultants, *reaching our target of 4 cooperative initiatives.*



Figure 1 - Cross Border Itineraries

- ✓ In addition, other **cross-border partnerships** are also being pursued between tour operators, tour guides and project entrepreneurs; a direct result from the "GreenLines" tours mentioned above.
 1. Israeli and Palestinian Tour Operators (Travellujah and Battir Guesthouse) implement tours to Battir.
 2. Auja EcoCenter invited to be listed on the "Israeli Hostel Listing" website platform (IHL). Invitation came about after good contacts and exchange meetings between the Abraham Hostel in Jerusalem and the Auja Center in Palestine.
 3. "Alkimah", Israeli Adventure Tour company, partners with Palestinian Tourism department in Beit Sahur – already implementing rappelling activities in Mar Saba, Auja and Battir.
 4. Israeli Tour Guide partners with Palestinian Tour Operator in Jericho to implement pilot tour for Israelis in Jericho. Additional Israeli Tour Guides showing great interest in conducting tours to Jericho for their Israeli groups.
 5. Dr. Uri Mayer-Chissik begins a partnership with SHE EcoPark staff: a project proposal was developed for exchanges between Dr. Chissik's student program "Local Leaders" and the SHE EcoPark.
 6. "Merhav Neshima" Initiative located in the Israeli Moshav Mevo Beitar, and Battir, Palestine begin partnering for production of salt-castles.
 7. Tour Guides from Ein Rafa, in Mateh Yehuda, Israel, and from Battir, Palestine discuss the development of a cross border landscape heritage trail.
 8. Establishment of cooperation between "Es-Sense" (Israel) and Auja EcoCenter and Sur Baher School (Palestine) for cosmetic and soap production courses.

- ✓ Adventure tourism, especially rappelling, is now being offered in Palestine due to the first-ever rappelling excursion at the Marsaba Monastery, organized through the GEI project. The event was filmed by the Palestinian Maan News Agency and viewed on Palestinian TV. Since then, numerous groups of youth and adults have rappelled down the cliff near the Marsaba Monastery as well as in Battir and Auja.

- ✓ Bicycle tours, including bike rentals, are also being offered now in Battir; these tours often include lunches - that are prepared by the local population - and visits to local handicraft stores. The GEI project has greatly increased the interest in Palestine for this form of tourism (adventure) and brought added revenue to the local area. Also, Israeli and Jordanian Tour Operators are now more likely to see Palestine as a destination for adventure tourism.

The **youth seminars** held in the Auja EcoCenter, the SHE EcoPark and the Ein Gedi EcoPark have resulted in all schools wanting to return for additional workshops, and many others hearing about the Centers' activities.

- ✓ **Youth questionnaires have shown that 73% of participants expressed a positive learning experience and understand the necessity to work together to protect their shared environment – almost reaching our target of 80%.**

Visitation to the Auja, Ein Gedi and SHE EcoPark has increased much due to exposure by the GEI project:

- ✓ **We have seen an increase of visitation since project start of 35% in the Sharhabil bin Hassneh EcoCenter in Jordan, a large increase of 350% in the Ein Gedi EcoCenter in Israel, and an increase of 96% in the Auja EcoCenter in Palestine, far surpassing our target of a 30% general increase of visitation to our 3 EcoParks.**

- ✓ The "**Demonstration Projects**", in the SHE EcoPark in particular - adventure tourism facilities - has not only attracted many more groups to the Park, but it has also facilitated in creating partnerships with Adventure Tour Guides and Operators in Jordan who were previously reluctant to bring their tourists to the EcoPark. Worthy to mention also the aquaponics garden and community garden in the Ein Gedi EcoPark which has attracted large numbers of visitors as well.

Two Final Events were held at the conclusion of the project in the form of "Eco-Fairs": one in the Mateh Yehuda Regional Council in Israel, and one in the Sharhabil bin Hassneh EcoPark in Jordan. In both events, **276** Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian project participants, together with project 'vendors', showcased their goods and the specific outputs of the project. Also in attendance at both events were representatives from the local and cross-border municipalities, as well as representatives from tourism departments in the region; Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian.

- ✓ In the Israeli event, the Israeli Deputy Minister of Regional Cooperation, Mr. Ayoub Kara, attended & praised the project for bringing together people from the region in this innovative cross border tourism initiative.
- ✓ The Jordanian event was held under the patronage of the Governor of Irbid, giving his stamp of approval of the project.



Figure 2 - Final Event in Tsur Hadassah



Figure 3 - Final Event in Jordan

The project held 161 events, comprised of 136 one-day youth seminars, 7 staff trainings, 7 "GreenLines" cross-border tours, 9 business-targeted tours and seminars, and 2 Final Events; *surpassing our target of 93 events.*

The project reached 7,592 people (3,576 men / 4,016 women) who attended the above mentioned events; *surpassing our target of 5,903 people (2,952 men / 2,951 women).*

Lessons Learned

This project targeted small business communities of Israel, Jordan and Palestine, focusing on economic benefits and self-interest. We were pleased to learn that **this approach proved itself** by indeed overcoming political obstacles and challenges.

We also learned that many of the community tourism and green initiatives visited throughout the project would need much capacity building before they can be readily incorporated into regional tourism itineraries. **Investment in capacity building in Palestine especially is much needed**, while in Israel and Jordan they are much stronger.

Another important lesson learned that EcoPeace would like to share, is that there is no alternative to **people-to-people interaction** when wanting to change an atmosphere from one of conflict and tension, to one of respect and understanding. Following every cross border tour, we witnessed that given these opportunities to meet the "other" side from across the border, **stereotypes disintegrated**, and cooperative interests were sought. Furthermore, the project was conducted during some very tumultuous times in the region (i.e. the war in Gaza), but opportunities for economic growth – even if cross border - were nonetheless pursued between Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians.

Resolving Constraints Identified

EcoPeace Middle East encountered several challenges that led to initial project delay, all of which were mentioned in project progress reports, but were overcome:

- **An 8-month delay in receiving guidance on dealing with Jordanian VAT.** Without guidance about Jordanian government VAT we were unable to actually hire the Jordanian Business Consultant, a key and critical component of the project. Since there were to be 3 business consultants hired for the project; one Jordanian, one Palestinian, and one Israeli, and they were required to work together to formulate cross border business scenarios, a key aspect of the whole project as described in the proposal, the inability to sign a contract with the Jordanian consultant caused a ripple effect that delayed all related project activities.
- We also encountered **delays due to staff changes (Israeli government refusal to issue a visa to Israel for a key Jordanian staff person, who we then had to change tasks)** and,
- The **Gaza war**, impacting especially the Palestinian Business Consultant's work, who had great difficulty identifying Palestinian "green businesses" that would be willing to work cross border at this time.

In the meantime, EcoPeace successfully advanced the project activities that were not affected by the above challenges, according to the original timeline, and to overcome the 8 month delay caused by the VAT issue, we requested a 6 month no-cost extension so that we could complete project activities and reach our goals. We are grateful to USAID that the requested extension was granted, allowing us to successfully complete the project.

Opportunities for Expansion

As a result of this project, an initial regional network of green enterprises has been established, which presents an ideal platform and connection point for further initiatives. EcoPeace already submitted follow-up project proposals that particularly aim at strengthening economic growth in the West Bank by encouraging domestic green production, ecotourism businesses and regional knowledge sharing. During the GEI project, EcoPeace and its participants realized that among the three countries, the challenge of achieving sustainable economic growth is most severe in Palestine. Affected by the political conflict and a limited natural resource base, Palestine's economy is still under-developed and not able to provide sufficient employment for its population. Sustainable green growth strategies need to be tailored to develop the economic sector for the benefit of local communities and the environment. Thus, follow-up projects will draw specific attention to support, train and connect existing Green Enterprises that will benefit the environment and generate income opportunities. Some of them are local entrepreneurs, tourist industry professionals, and local community members who are already part of the established network of the GEI project.

In terms of activities, EcoPeace intends to hold trainings and workshops for local enterprises on how to meet "Green Economy" criteria, creating a stronger local network and promoting and marketing green products on a regional level, and teaching youth and students 'green economy' principles and environmental awareness. Another proposed activity cluster includes activities that will advance ecotourism and networks by using regional experience and expertise, offers of ecotourism services at the Auja EcoCenter, trainings of local residents to run cultural tourism sites, and promotion of a regional ecotourism network. Tourism, and in particular ecotourism, is currently still underdeveloped in Palestine. However, in Israel, and partly also in Jordan, rural tourism is well advanced with extensive guesthouse facilities. Here, diversifying economic activities to include rural tourism has proven to be very successful, which indicates the potential the region holds for Palestinian communities as well. Thus, future projects shall be designed to make use of this potential, maximize the benefits from the local, regional and international tourists who visit the region year round, and provide assistance to families and local business that could be linked to rural tourism and provide different kind of services to tourists, such as guest houses, restaurants, guided tours, trips to Bedouin communities and local agricultural businesses. In a bottom-up fashion, proposed projects will support the development of a rural tourism industry in Palestine by learning from the experience and through cooperation with the well-developed rural tourism industry on the Israeli and Jordanian side of the Jordan River. Utilizing EcoPeace's extensive contacts in the tourism industry – in Palestine, regional and international, will be an additional benefit for marketing and advertising.

EcoPeace intends to continue working on Green Economy Initiatives based on a regional approach through integrating the approach into the Good Water Neighbors program. Potential business ties, e.g. for the purpose of regional marketing, between community members, local leaderships and cross-border entrepreneurs will be further promoted and can be an additional and reinforcing basis for trust-building and a motivation to cooperate across borders.

How it fits into USAID's Strategic Objectives

EcoPeace's "Green Economy Initiative" (GEI) project was carried out under USAID'S Conflict Management & Mitigation mechanism, and fits into many of USAID's strategic objectives:

- The project was based on a **people-to-people** approach
- It **brought together people** - Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians - **across the borders**
- It **expanded the peace constituency** of Israelis and Palestinians, and
- It **produced concrete and measurable results**

In addition, through meetings with USAID's Private Enterprise Office of WB/G and also through USAID in Jordan, EcoPeace learned about USAID's "**COMPETE**" program. Of the COMPETE Program's five programmatic areas, the GEI project is relevant to three of them: Tourism, Associations and Service Providers, and Agriculture.

In the field of *Tourism*, the GEI project serves as both a model of how cross-border networks can be facilitated, as well as a pilot for the kinds of trainings, events, marketing, and other actions that were undertaken in the project, that can launch local and foreign tourism visits and the spawning of tourism related enterprises around such sites and assets. EcoPeace identified positive interest from the tourism industry on both sides of the border for cross-border cooperation utilizing the region's beautiful landscape, producing 4 cross border itineraries that were deemed "sellable" by business and marketing consultants.

EcoPeace's 3 Eco-Centers that were highlighted and further developed in the GEI project, are now better prepared to join and strengthen national or regional *Associations and Service Providers'* groups. The Eco-Centers themselves are service providers that exemplify three different but related models of eco - and peace - tourism facilities: the Auja EcoCenter is a unique environmental education facility in Palestine, Sharhabil bin Hassneh EcoPark is distinctive for the green open spaces it provides to the public in the northern Jordan Valley of Jordan, and the Ein Gedi EcoPark provides hands-on activities unique to its desert area.

The GEI project's *Agricultural* focus did not include larger policy issues, such as the use of treated wastewater or water pricing, rather, the project's focus was on organic and traditional agriculture (i.e. Battir's terraced landscape and ancient irrigation system) and served as pilots in conjunction with the development of additional eco- and other tourism based livelihoods for the local communities targeted.

For all of the above noted program areas, the GEI project fit well into USAID's Strategic Objectives, specifically vis-à-vis the COMPETE project.