

## Community Foundation for South Sinai

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The Sinai peninsula links Africa and Asia. Its desert landscapes include vast barren plains and mountains green with aromatic plants and orchards. Described by mediaeval pilgrims as a 'terrible, waste-howling wilderness', the Bedouin who live there call their home 'the land of fragrance and scented herbs'. Egypt's rarest plants and animals and the world's smallest butterfly take refuge among its highest mountains. Its coral reefs are among the finest to be found. The world's oldest continuously-practising Christian monastery nestles at the foot of Mount Sinai, protected by the Prophet himself and guarding pilgrimage sites sacred to three faiths. By any standards, South Sinai is special.

But what really makes Sinai remarkable is its people. We have been privileged to visit South Sinai for many years due to my husband's work in ecology and conservation, and we have acquired immense respect for the Bedouin people who live there: their deep understanding of the harsh landscapes they live in, their skilful use of natural resources like medicinal plants, and above all their great traditions of giving and hospitality. At times our lives have been in their hands. When we came to live in Egypt over two years ago, we - along with two close Egyptian friends - felt it was time to give something back. My work in Derbyshire Community Foundation over the previous ten years, and contact with the global movement, made it natural to explore whether we could make a community foundation work in South Sinai.

Whilst most Bedouin live in extreme poverty, there is serious money in South Sinai. Tourism is still booming in Sharm, fortunes have been made in development and construction, and oil and mineral extraction are established industries. On the other hand there is strong interest in the area from eco-tourists and the environmentally-aware, keen to support the area and limit the damage done by development to the environment and local traditions. Initial research suggested no shortage of potential donors.

Our first key challenge was to get the governance structure right: to use a model that would not attract adverse attention from the government (risking official obstruction or refusal to register); yet which would leave us free to act and pursue an independent agenda. It took eighteen months of negotiation with the Ministry of Social Affairs to arrive at what we have: in effect, a Sinai-registered foundation that works inclusively but which can protect the integrity of its vision; with a Board made up of two Egyptians, two UK citizens and one Bedouin community leader. From this core we can invite participation and consultation, while steering the Foundation's development through its early stages.

It has become quickly apparent that we have to adapt received wisdom for use in a legal and cultural environment quite different from western patterns. The NGO sector is weak in Egypt as a whole and lacks independence. In Sinai, with massive poverty and illiteracy, huge gender issues, and social capital built on utterly different traditional norms, there is barely a handful of active NGOs whose work can be supported with confidence. In this environment a standard fundraising approach is

doomed: why should any donor invest where returns are so uncertain? So our initial strategy to build endowment first has been revised, and we've gone back to first principles. What is happening in this community? What are the factors that most affect the lives of its people? What are their hopes and aspirations? What are their obstacles to achieving them? As Chair of the Foundation I have learned Arabic, and spent the Spring of this year interviewing local people in their own homes.

What I have found is a massive waste of human resources. Most of the people I talk to never went to school; but their ideas are often sound and sensible. They are informed by observation, discussion and thought, and they know what will and won't work in this community. Their ideas and energies are a great resource, if anyone would bother to tap it. Bedouin are marginalized in their own homeland: their lack of education means all but menial jobs go to better-educated Egyptian incomers, reinforcing their poverty (up to one-third of the families I interviewed spend less than \$2 per person per *week* on food). Healthcare is poor or non-existent. This community has, I would guess, the same proportion of bright people, entrepreneurs, thinkers, leaders, as any community in the world. But listening to people talking about their ideas and aspirations is like watching gladiators trying to fight from inside a net. The hopes of Bedouin people are often no different from ours; what they lack is access to the means of achieving them.

If our Foundation is to achieve anything it has to start from where this community is. We want it to give people a chance, to do meaningful work, to recognize the need of women to do meaningful work, to educate their children for success. This is what people want. But if this is going to happen we have to play a much more hands-on role than most. Normally, when a community foundation wants to help people get from A to B it makes a grant to the NGO with the most appropriate vehicle. In South Sinai we are going to have to build the car. (Fortunately, Bedouin make brilliant mechanics!) Working with community leaders we have started to support educational work with orphaned children; and we are now working up a new social enterprise to develop weaving of local wool, allowing women to use existing skills to produce fine hand-embroidered products.

So – we have a great challenge ahead of us: to be effectively an operating foundation while never taking our eyes off the goal of endowment. Attracting donors for both. Spreading the word and raising the profile (our camel race launch in January, reported nationally, was a good start). Attracting support in Egypt and elsewhere, including diaspora donors. Keeping our grassroots links with local people alive and at the heart of what we do. Someone said to me the other day: 'Looks like you've found your life's work...' They're probably right.

[www.southsinaifoundation.org](http://www.southsinaifoundation.org)

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