

Israel

# Golda's notebook for the developing world

A surge of Israeli initiated projects is leveraging the economic potential of women in Africa and Asia

**By Bernard Dichek**

Shoshan Haran holds high-quality seedlings for planting by Ethiopian farmers, with payment deferred until after the harvest





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**EVER SINCE** Golda Meir’s first visit to Africa as foreign minister in 1961, women in the developing world have often been the main focus of Israel’s development efforts, just as Israeli women frequently have been the key movers and shakers.

“One of the biggest things Golda Meir did back then was to make people aware of how the economic potential of women was being ignored,” says Mazal Renfeld, who until recently served as director of the Haifa-based Golda Meir Mount Carmel International Training Center (MCTC), which was set up by the Foreign Ministry’s Mashav agency in the wake of Meir’s 1961 trip to provide women from the developing world with leadership skills.

“In 2000, when I heard the Millennium Goals about gender equality and women’s empowerment announced at the UN, I felt like they were reading a page out of Meir’s notebook from 40 years before,” recalls Renfeld to *The Jerusalem Report*.

But the center’s strategy initially backfired. “After about 10 years of bringing women to Israel for courses, a follow-up study in 1971 showed that there was no change, no advancement in the women’s situation in their home countries,” says Renfeld. “What we forgot about was the cultural hierarchy. Without involving men [in our programs], there was no chance to create change.”

The MCTC learned its lesson, Renfeld

adds, and the inclusion of men in subsequent courses enabled decision-makers in many countries to see the value of utilizing the women’s newly acquired skills.

## INSTEAD OF ONLY THINKING ABOUT SUBSISTENCE, THE IDEA IS TO GET PEOPLE THINKING ABOUT PROFITABILITY

“Since then, many of our graduates have risen to key positions, including becoming cabinet ministers in several African countries,” notes Renfeld, pointing out that about 20,000 trainees have participated in MCTC programs.

In recent years, there has been a surge of projects initiated by Israelis in the developing world. Many of these programs aim to leverage the economic potential of women, and they are often founded by women. “Many of these innovative programs also come from the private sector, where Israeli start-up thinking is being applied,” notes Ariel Dloomy, who heads the Israel branch of the Society for International Development.

These programs include the founding of a Tel Aviv University think tank for promoting Israeli entrepreneurship in the developing world by Aliza Belman Inbal; Sivan Ya’ari’s Innovation Africa solar energy project (see *The Jerusalem Report*, March 25, 2013); Shoshan Haran’s seed initiative in Ethiopia; Gili Navon and Shaked Avizedek’s weaving co-op in India; and Ornit Avidar’s water technologies start-up in Cameroon.

Women also play a central role in several of the projects that desert agriculture expert Dov Pasternak has initiated in some of the poorest regions of Niger. Prior to tackling the agricultural problems of Niger, Pasternak spent 25 years as the director of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev’s Institute for Agriculture and Applied Biology, where he and his team pioneered many of the technologies that enabled the Negev’s farmers to make the desert bloom. “I took David Ben-Gurion’s vision seriously,” Pasternak recalls for *The Report*.

In 2001, after serving as a consultant in 25 countries and looking for a new challenge, Pasternak moved to Niger to head an agricultural research team operated by ICRISAT, an international agricultural research institute. During his 10 years in that position, he undertook several projects based on his realization that it would require more than technology to combat poverty.

One of the projects, the African Market



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Garden, leverages both the advantages of drip irrigation and the economic power of women. “Women are more reliable than men [in that region,] and the income they generate goes back to the family,” he says, adding, “It took me a while to understand the importance of that.”

The Market Garden project today has grown to include more than 10,000 participants. Through the project, the farmers have moved from subsistence with single plots of lands to communal drip-irrigated farms where they earn five times as much as they previously did. “Instead of barely having enough to feed their own families, they now grow enough produce to sell for a profit at the market,” says Pasternak.

But the project did not start out as a success.

“One of the secrets of working in development is that you make a mistake and then you try to correct it,” he says. “One of my first mistakes [in Niger] was to introduce drip irrigation for women farmers working in small individual gardens.”

**THE ATTEMPT** to get them to master drip irrigation failed, Pasternak notes, because they lacked the agricultural background and supervision. The key to success, he found, was to have the farmers work together in large communal gardens where follow-up could be arranged in a practical way.

“Women are community-oriented, and it’s easier to organize them in groups,” observes Pasternak.

The African Market Garden has been so successful that it is being expanded into neighboring Senegal, with funding from the governments of Italy and Israel and other agencies. But because the technology-based drip irrigation farms require extensive initial investment, the project model remains beyond the reach of many of Africa’s subsistence farmers.

In order to help out those farmers, Pasternak, who continues to regularly visit Niger, is developing another model that is based on what he describes as “a different philosophical approach.” The project is called Farmers of the Future and is based on the success of an experiment that he started in the Niger village of Sadore. Once again, the main vehicle for bringing about change is women; though in this case, children also play a prominent role.

The project had its origins about six years ago, when Pasternak and several women leaders arranged for about 30 women in Sadore to be given a hectare of land for the cultivation of tree seedlings. In addition, land was set aside for their children to develop a vegetable garden, and joint agricultural and marketing activities were organized for both the mothers and the children. The children’s farming was accompanied by an educational

(Above) Sowing high-quality seeds at the Butajira experimental growing station in Ethiopia; (center) Agriculture expert Shaked Avizedek (right) working with a Mising woman in the development of a vegetable garden; (far left) Gili Navon (center) with the artisans who founded the Rengam Mising weaver cooperative in India

program that emphasized entrepreneurial skills.

“The project was based on a philosophy that attempts to change attitudes,” he says. “Instead of only thinking about subsistence, the idea is to get people thinking about profitability.”

When Pasternak returned to Sadore after being away for three years, he found that the combined farming-education program had transformed the village. “The tree nursery had doubled in size, with 300,000 seedlings in production,” he notes. “Each woman was generating an income of \$2,000, five times the national average. And most important, the women were sending their children to high school in the neighboring town of Say.”

Pasternak says that the women previously did not have the resources to pay for their children’s high school education and that the children themselves are now also motivated to continue their studies. The success of the

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project has also resulted in social change. “The men no longer take additional wives, and many have joined the women in constructing private nurseries in their backyards,” he says.

As a result of this success, the project is currently being scaled up in three more villages, with collaboration from the Pencils for Kids and Eliminate Poverty Now NGOs.

One reason why the Fair Planet project for poverty alleviation in Ethiopia can be expected to succeed, explains Shoshan Haran, who founded the nonprofit organization in 2012, is that as far as the farmer is concerned, no drastic change in farming methods is required.

“Many agricultural projects in Africa have failed because they require extensive training or the introduction of new technologies that are difficult to maintain,” says Haran. “But the farmers already grow tomato plants. They just don’t have high-quality seeds.”

Fair Planet’s field tests in the central Ethiopian town of Butajira have shown that high-quality hybrid seeds that suit the local soil and climate conditions can increase the yield of a crop by more than five times compared with a crop that is derived from the open-pollinated seeds that Ethiopian farmers traditionally gather at the end of the growing season.

“Instead of having a crop that lacks resistance to diseases and spoils within two days of harvesting, the farmer stands to produce a reliable crop with a shelf life of two weeks, sufficient time to make it to the large markets of Addis Ababa,” observes Haran.

Haran’s decision to use seeds as a vehicle for revolutionizing agriculture in the developing world reflects her observation that “seeds are the basis for all foods.” It is also a strategy that stems from her lengthy career working as a scientist with Hazera, Israel’s largest developer of seed products.

Haran’s experience in the global seed industry led her to understand what it would take to draw the participation of profit-driven companies that spend hundreds of millions of dollars every year developing new seeds. “Our business model is based on a win-win approach for both the farmers and the global companies.”

**ACCORDING TO** Fair Planet’s model, the farmers do not receive the seeds for free. Instead, the organization defers payment for the seeds until after the harvest, when the farmer is able to sell his crop. “The companies are gaining entry to a growing futures market, in addition to sharing responsibility

for dealing with world hunger,” notes Haran.

Haran points out that there is no need to develop new seeds for the small-plot farmers of Africa, just to leverage the seeds that have already been developed and to test them locally. At the Butajira testing station, more than 30 varieties were tested before a decision was made about the most suitable tomato seed varieties. Several farmers are now growing these seed varieties, and the first crop is expected during April.

## WOMEN ARE MORE RELIABLE THAN MEN IN THAT REGION, AND THE INCOME THEY GENERATE GOES BACK TO THE FAMILY

Another reason why Fair Planet stands to succeed is Haran’s indefatigable enthusiasm, which may be connected to her origins as a member of Kibbutz Be’eri. Haran was born on the Negev kibbutz, where the communal lifestyle of members pooling their salaries and eating together in the dining hall continues.

“I find it absurd that the hungriest people in the world don’t have access to the seeds that the rest of us have,” she concludes.

Ornit Avidar, a former Israeli economic attaché in Qatar, Oman and Hong Kong, wants to help people in the developing world for humanitarian reasons, but believes that the most efficient way is through a profit-making business.

“It’s illogical, it’s uneconomic and it’s unacceptable that 780 million people in the world don’t have access to clean water,” Avidar tells *The Report*, explaining why she founded WaterWays, a company that is trying to come up with solutions for the water problems of several regions in the West African country of Cameroon.

But Avidar’s business-minded approach is one that doesn’t start with regular business-like considerations. “Most companies only think about bringing new technologies, but if you don’t put the technology in the right context, it will fail,” she says, referring to studies showing that 50 percent of water improvement projects in the developing world ultimately fail.

“One of the NGOs established a state-of-the-art water treatment system in Kenya, but

the community didn’t find the water tasty and continued to drink from the contaminated river,” she notes, as a way of showing the importance of examining cultural and educational issues.

Maintenance costs can also be a major problem. “In another Cameroon community, the Danish aid agency donated 350 water supply points in 350 villages, all of which need rehabilitation today because the villagers didn’t have the money to pay for their upkeep,” says Avidar. The right context for a technology to succeed, explains Avidar, means getting to know what a specific community is like and what its economic strengths are. “Only then is it possible to think about introducing new technologies,” she says.

**IN A PILOT** project in Nkhu, a village of 1,500 in northwestern Cameroon where people have a contaminated water supply, Avidar is putting her approach to work, starting with what she describes as “social mobilization.”

Together with local NGO Life Water Development Group Cameroon, WaterWays is carrying out discussions with community leaders about new ways for the community to make money.

“One of the women in a meeting pointed out that in a nearby village the inhabitants were able to obtain five times the price for their cassava plant because they were able to grind it into flakes,” Avidar recounts. “So what we are doing now is setting up a Village Income Center that will grind cassava. The money earned is intended for paying for maintenance and management costs for the water technology and solar power that will be brought to the village.”

Avidar hopes to apply the holistic WaterWays approach throughout Cameroon, a country of more than 20 million where over 200 different languages are spoken. “Every community requires a specific approach towards ensuring that the technology can be sustained,” she says.

She is continuing her preparations through regular visits to Cameroon. In November, the technology aspect will finally come to the forefront when she leads a delegation of Israeli water system technology companies to a conference in Cameroon’s capital of Yaoundé.

When Gili Navon came to the lush island of Majuli in northeastern India for the first time as a 24-year-old backpacker in 2007, she thought she was in paradise. “There was something about the undisturbed way of life and the genuine friendliness of the people



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Inspired by Golda: Mazal Renfeld, former director of the Haifa-based Golda Meir Mount Carmel International Training Center

that deeply touched my heart,” says Navon, attributing the warm hospitality shown to strangers to the traditional local Assamese culture.

But not everything that she observed was idyllic.

“On a day-to-day basis, everyone manages just fine; but when emergencies arise, they are often left helpless,” she tells *The Report*, noting that people seldom have the money needed to pay for urgent medical care at the mainland hospital, or even for the cost of emergency ferry transport.

She also learned that the fertile rice paddy land of the island was rapidly eroding, as a result of dams built upstream on the Brahmaputra River. In addition, she discovered that the island’s inhabitants, mainly members of the Mising tribe, were considered to be one of India’s lowest castes and were openly discriminated against by other ethnic groups.

Convinced that she would someday return to the place that had captured her heart, but uncertain how, she came back to Israel, where she studied anthropology and Indian studies at Jerusalem’s Hebrew University, eventually becoming one of the first graduates of the university’s Glocal program, a master’s degree in community development for the developing world.

Navon returned to Majuli in 2011 to do a practicum as part of her Glocal studies.

During her four-month internship with a local NGO, Navon’s role was to simply do an assessment of the community’s needs and assets. She wasn’t expected to initiate a new program.

But after carefully studying one of the community’s assets, she came up with a breakthrough idea. “Every Majuli woman is both a talented designer and a weaver,” says Navon, referring to the exquisite and intricately woven scarves and clothes the women produce. “But substantial obstacles prevent them from making a living as weavers.” For instance, they are hampered by their remote location and the absence of a marketing network. “Moreover, as tribal women, they face discrimination as well as cultural and social obstacles.”

Navon’s idea was to have the women organize themselves into collectives that would provide them with a platform for cooperation. By pooling resources, they could market their products jointly and command far better prices. They could also buy better handlooms and cover transportation costs. But before that could happen there was a tough hurdle to cross. “We [in Israel] grow up with the idea that we have an unlimited number of choices and that it’s possible to change things. That’s something we take for granted, but in Majuli that isn’t the case,” Navon says.

Other economic programs in Majuli had

failed in the past. As it turned out, what set Navon apart was her ability to speak to the Mising women in their own language, and the trust she had nurtured through the time she had spent living with them.

Navon helped the women organize a collective of 25 partners from 20 villages who now meet on a monthly basis, and she put them in touch with other weaving groups outside of the island that were successfully marketing their products. The women were soon able to buy raw materials together at lower prices and market their products efficiently.

“For the first time, they had their own independent platform where they could work together on both economic and social issues,” says Navon, noting that when a woman recently required emergency surgery, the collective was able to pay for a private ferry to rush her to the mainland as well as for her hospital care.

The collective, known as Rengam, is continuing to grow and now includes 80 members. With Rengam having its own elected leadership and being self-sufficient, Navon is now trying to expand the women’s cooperative efforts into other spheres. She has been joined by Shaked Avizedek, an agriculture expert and fellow graduate of the Glocal program, and the two are laying down plans to expand the project, now known as Amar Majuli. ■