

## TFC Network News

### Bringing Life to the Desert

At TFC we have decided to usher in the new decade by sending you the first in our new *Pathfinders for Change* interview series. We are privileged here to showcase the work of Michael Ben Eli, a world-renowned environmentalist who has been working with Israelis and Bedouins to create a sustainable desert community that brings together a broad-based network of Israelis, Palestinians, environmental science, government and private industry to create a new template for living. The interviewer is one of TFC's founders, New York-based writer and coach, Joanna Infeld.

**Joanna:** First I'd like to ask you about yourself. How did you first become interested in sustainability?

**Michael:** It's a long story. I was an architecture student in London and in my first year I met Buckminster Fuller who was an early champion of sustainability, although it was not yet a known term. He had given up on hopes that big businesses and governments would be leaders of change and was looking to young people. He had conceived a project whereby students of architectural schools around the world would collaborate on a ten year program to redesign the world! It was a fantastic concept involving the economy and environment and dealing with issues of water and energy. I'd not heard of anything quite like this before.

#### The Sustainability Laboratory

**Joanna:** Can you say a little about how the Sustainability Laboratory came about?

**Michael:** After working for many years in sustainable development with multi-lateral international agencies including UN agencies, the World Bank etc., I came to realise there are huge limitations to what large organisations can do because decisions are usually made by consensus. By the time 190 countries agree there is often no connection remaining between the decision and the original issue. The private sector has different challenges. Even the most ambitious CEO champion of sustainability programmes can only go so far before running up against the corporate accounting department.

That's when I came up with the idea of a 'Sustainability Laboratory' – an entity that does what others cannot do. Its mandate is to experiment with new ideas and build up a portfolio of showcase projects that are not aligned to a narrow interest area, but are based on looking at the whole system with a long view and open attitude, approach and methodology that can be applied to any problem. There is tendency put issues into silos, but this prohibits the large scale integration that is needed to find solutions. I see that everything is inter-related



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#### Events

**What does the Future Need?** A TFC webinar, Sunday March 14, 6pm GMT

#### Next Issue

The Internet has given us a hugely powerful vehicle for global collaboration towards the growth of consciousness. The next issue of the newsletter looks at how communications tools such as FaceBook and Twitter are quickening this virtual community.

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and so one should not try to define a particular problem area, but rather define a way of dealing with challenges and assemble the best experts to address them.

### The Tenets of Sustainability

**Joanna:** How would you compare the Sustainability Laboratory to other initiatives?

**Michael:** When I looked at how to differentiate the lab from similar institutes, or centres, one thing I saw lacking was a set of common principles. What are the minimal elements that, if violated, mean that sustainability cannot be achieved? It's like if you want to fly and so design an airplane, you need to know the principles of aerodynamics. Today people over-use the term sustainability to the point where it no longer has meaning. So I came up with five core principles of sustainability that are the intellectual platform, or the basic tenets, of the laboratory's work.

### Creating a Desert Community

**Joanna:** How the Sustainability Laboratory work being applied in the Negev project?

**Michael:** The project in Israel is the first opportunity to embody these principles in a real world situation. I first went to see the Desert Research Institute of Ben-Gurion University with a view to including it among the network of global research institutions that would constitute the Sustainability Laboratory. I was very impressed with what they were doing in the Negev with solar energy, water recycling and desert agriculture. Then I noticed that on one side of the street were Bedouin villagers living in poverty and misery, while on the other was the ecology being developed that could provide the solution – the two just needed being brought together.

We began the desert community project as a model for others. Leveraged by modern technology, it would be based on Bedouin traditions, cultural aspirations and values and include organically reared sheep and goats for meat and dairy, with a large medicinal plant growing operation. The desert has many highly potent plants that have been used by Bedouins for centuries, not yet known to science, which represents knowledge which is quickly disappearing. So we will try to domesticate these plants and turn them into some products such as tea and cosmetics to begin with.

At the farm everything is designed to be integrated: zero emissions, carbon neutral and no waste. By-products of one process are resourced into another so that manure provides compost and bio-gas. Under a new government scheme, solar energy will be used to power the community with the excess being sold back to the grid at attractive prices – making electricity a saleable product.

The centre – which is set up as a cooperative – will also provide training and education to the neighbouring communities on the new methods. The cooperative model, based on democratic processes, is a major breakthrough in terms of governance systems for the Bedouins who are traditionally tribal, hierarchical and male-dominated. This is especially promising for the women who have been involved from the outset in setting it up.

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### Broad-spectrum Collaboration

**Joanna:** How is the project progressing so far?

**Michael:** We'll see; it is a fascinating experiment. When I started, everybody said it would never work but it has been going tremendously. Even the government, which said it would never give us land, has been very cooperative and we now have a very nice 200 acre site. It has attracted so much good will from the Bedouin community and outsiders alike that there are some 50 people working on the early planning stage, including members from the Bedouin communities, university researchers, government officials, local NGOs and private industry. The latter includes one of the largest drink irrigation companies in the world, Netafim, which started in one of the local towns and is planning all the irrigation on the site. Another is Solar Zenith, an offshoot of research from Ben-Gurion University, who are planning a very advanced solar system for the community. All in all, it is a fascinating group of unlikely collaborators who are all very excited to be able to work together.

**Joanna:** Do you see this becoming a template for the future?

**Michael:** Absolutely! The project in the Negev is a model not only for that area and its people, but for anywhere in the world with similar conditions. [End](#)



Michael Ben Eli with Ibrahim Al Atrash, leader of Sheep Growers Association of the Unrecognized Villages, in his tent encampment just north of the Negev town of Beer Sheva. Read more about the project on [www.sustainabilitylabs.org](http://www.sustainabilitylabs.org)