Getting Organised with

Mounir Neamatalla

By Mona Amin

You have either heard of or visited the enigmatic Adrere Amellal ecodoge in Siwa. Seemingly located in the middle of nowhere, this exclusive hotel has no electricity and mobiles are prohibited. You dine in elegance fit for kings under beautiful palm trees with sterling silver cutlery and haute cuisine composed of purely Siwan ingredients. The clientele features the cream of society from around the world, including royalty, famous actors, ambassadors, politicians, artists and writers. Last May, Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall made it their destination of choice in Egypt. Despite the rumoured high prices, the place is booked year round.

Cairo Agenda decided to meet the equally enigmatic man who has managed to create one of the most exclusive international tourist destinations in the world. An Old Victorian, Dr. Neamatalla secured a scholarship that allowed him to shift from Cairo University and complete his bachelors and masters degrees at the University of Wisconsin, in chemical engineering. He then obtained a doctorate in Environmental Health and Quality Management from Columbia University in New York. Founder and President of Environmental Quality International (EQI), one of the region’s leading development consulting firms, Dr. Mounir Neamatalla, turned a utopian vision of profitable private investment that goes hand in hand with a social conscience, environmental protection, and community development into a reality, implementing the very principles that he has been advising his clients on for years.

What attracted you to Environment?
Engineering wasn’t really my passion. I stumbled into it because it was the thing to do in my time. If you did well in school you went into engineering. But petrochemicals were not my dream, so I made the shift. I have always been interested in social issues and the state of mankind and I have always had a desire to make a contribution to the evolution of mankind, which got me interested in the environment.

Were you thinking of the environment in Egypt or worldwide?
The more you get exposed to the world the more you realize that national divides are one of the absurdities that we have to live with. Cultures are interrelated and being Egyptian I couldn’t help but feel how my national background connected me to other cultures. If there is one thing that has influenced my outlook on life, gained from my travels and living abroad, it is a reinforcement of an instinctive feeling that I have always had, which is that one should think of oneself as part of the other, and not apart from the other.

How else has living abroad affected you?
Life in New York taught me how to manage life, have the courage to dream and believe that dreams can be realised. My education in America also taught me to be receptive to different points of view, different outlooks, and different interpretations. It made me immune to the culture of simplistic interpretations of human beings or events. But let me also tell you how Egypt has influenced me. If there is a hospitable environment that you can imagine living in,
certainly Egypt provides it. In Egypt, I had a sense not just of belonging but a sense of safety and security that I think is difficult to parallel elsewhere. If you were to ask me to define the most important attribute of Egyptians I would say that Egyptians are peaceful and if you ask me to name the biggest contribution Egypt has made to the world in the last 25 years I would say the politics of peace and dialogue. I think the big challenge that faces us as Egyptians is being civically minded and moving from looking at the needs of our nuclear family or larger family to begin looking at our cities as important arenas for action. Somehow we are not as civically minded as we should be.

**Why do you think that this is the case?**
We somehow made a mistake during our revolution when we nationalised civil society and civic action. There is a period in our history when a lot of our civil society organisations were converted to state-run organisations, and therefore, the connection between the individual and society began to weaken.

**Can you tell us something about Prince Charles’ visit to Siwa?**
His visit to Siwa is symbolic. He is a man who is as concerned with the condition of the climate as he is with the condition of his country; as concerned with promoting dialogue among different cultures as he is about his national interest. Prince Charles has managed to transcend national barriers and truly begin participating in the construction of a world that is guided by higher value systems. His visit symbolises what is happening in Siwa is right. Siwa has the potential to become the hub for sustainable development, an example of how wise management of natural resources, engaging local communities, respecting their heritage and making sure that these communities connect with other markets can get them out of the cycle of poverty and into a state of prosperity.

**Is the younger generation in Siwa supporting your initiatives?**
Human beings all over the world are interested and motivated by their livelihood. The art of taking people from poverty to prosperity is to make sure that the initiatives you are proposing give them more wealth and hope, and improve their standard of living. If they know that keeping the oasis clean brings them more money, they will keep the oasis clean. If Siwan can sell their organic produce at higher prices because it is organic, they will not use chemical fertilisers. So what is the role of a company like ours? Our role is to link the discriminating consumer who appreciates a clean product to its producer; and these discriminating consumers are increasing by the day.

I would like to see Siwa become a symbol of an advanced community that has learnt from our accumulated experiences the worth of sound and wise management of environmental resources, protecting the environment, eating clean products, using clean energy, supporting micro-enterprises, building civil society organisations, and participating in governance. Siwa is an example that could be followed by other places in Egypt and around the world.

The interesting point is that by being guided by these principles you can actually establish successful businesses. You also establish successful business relationships and as you grow and evolve, the community also benefits. But this cannot be done by one private actor. We establish strong relationships with the local community and we have good solid collaborative relationships with the local authority, and we work very closely with the governor. To begin dealing with problems of energy production and wastage of water, you have to begin conversing with central governmental authorities. When we began this web of collaborative arrangements it became very clear that no number of private firms could do it alone, we needed a civil society organization in Siwa that could realise this mission, carry the work forward, and guard the evolution of the oasis. Such an organisation has been created; it incorporates Siwan members of the community, people from the local authorities, business people, journalists and writers.

**It has been said that locals in Sinai feel alienated by the development that has taken place there. What is your opinion?**
I am not in Sinai so I cannot comment on Sinai, but I can tell you what I think is a good approach that will invariably create a hospitable environment for all. Sinai and Siwa are remote areas, closed areas where the people are in closer touch with themselves than with their country or the rest of the world. If you enter there as an investor the first and most important thing to do is to make sure whatever you do, whatever your gains, the community will benefit, and that doesn’t mean just giving them jobs. All human beings are enterprising from birth, but through