



## ***“PLANTING TREES IS EASY, GROWING TREES IS DIFFICULT”***

On 27 January 2021 Menaqua organised the webinar “How to plant more trees in MENA?”. Three keynote speakers addressed this issue from different angles, followed by a forum discussion on questions, concerns and propositions from the audience. The simultaneous translation in Arabic and English made the webinar accessible for a broad audience. There were over 75 participants, including the HE Ambassador of Lebanon in the Netherlands, Mr. Abdel Satter Issa.

### **Keynotes**

Professor Salma Nashabe Talhouk of the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences and the Nature Conservation Center at the American University of Beirut stated that “Planting trees is easy. Long-term care is the challenge”. She strongly advocated to fully engage resident communities in tree planting initiatives. Implementing organisations are, however, mostly not connected with the communities, and generally financed based on the number of trees planted. Indicators should therefore focus more on people and what they will gain from tree planting. Prof. Talhouk also reiterated the short time span of projects in relation with the long-time span of the growing, protection and caring of the planted seedlings. This requires a viable exit strategy. Because the communities will have to protect and manage the planted trees for the next 30 to 50 years it is imperative to understand the dynamics of communities, their interests and benefits, and empower them by complementing indigenous knowledge with scientific best practices and modern technologies. For this purpose, it is necessary to invest in key community members. They may be farmers, nature lovers, heritage keepers, or educators. *Tree planting should thus be an activity that is led locally and contributes directly to the livelihood of residents.*

Mr Arnout Asjes MSc, Chief Technology Officer with the Land Life Company, fully agrees with Prof. Talhouk that “Planting trees is easy, growing is difficult”. He described various projects, up to the planting of multimillion of trees, which had not been successful. Mr. Asjes gave some examples of regions in Europe, Asia, and America where deforestation had resulted in severe desertification. These areas face more frequent dust storms, adverse impacts of flooding and even migration. To reverse this trend the right technology and a long-term vision on tree planting projects, together with their financing, is critical. This especially applies to water conservation techniques. Mr. Asjes, shared some interesting examples of indigenous technology of water conservation that have inspired him and his company to develop new products. He emphasised that the selection of species, location and the proper timing are critical factors. As trees may have a large variety of purposes it is also critical that local stakeholders are involved, and that the local socio-economic setting and possible conflicts are well understood. The local population should support the project, else we should not plant trees. Mr. Asjes ended his address by stating that success requires hard work, long breath, good research, good monitoring and learning from mistakes. *“Plant the right species at the right place and right time”.*

Dr. Melle Leenstra is the Agricultural Counsellor to Egypt & Jordan from the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality of the Netherlands. He observed the inspiring variety and strong contrasts of landscapes in the Middle East, but also the huge contrasts between productive areas and degraded lands. Mr Leenstra advocated the development of regenerative agriculture including agroforestry. He described the need of a paradigm shift from the maximizing of agricultural production, which has often led to *“an economic race to the top and an ecological race to the bottom”*, towards more sustainable agricultural systems. This also means working with nature to combat climate change and (re)store carbon in plants and soils. Mr Leenstra would promote cooperation, trade and investment. He welcomes the role of social enterprises, stating that there is no contradiction between doing business and building a sustainable future. Mr. Leenstra gave some successful examples of social entrepreneurs



in the MENA. He stated that locally based entrepreneurs and dedicated professionals are key for long-standing initiatives, and for generating employment. He calls for building and investing in local ventures and good cooperation with knowledge institutes. International organisations should support such ventures and facilitate co-financing. *“Invest in long-term relationships with social entrepreneurs”*.

### Forum discussion

Some of the participants wanted to know how reforested areas can create economic value without cutting trees. It was replied that not only timber, but also fruits and nuts are among the traditional income from trees. The sequestration of carbon is another value chain is, but it should be acknowledged that its potential is limited in the MENA considering the harsh conditions and slow growing rate of trees. It was also remarked that NGOs are increasingly willing to finance projects for water retention, biodiversity, and nature restoration.

One of the participants wanted to know how local communities in the MENA perceive reforestation and whether they must face trade-offs or tension with other land users. It was stated that the starting point should not be the reforestation project itself, but the local communities. In the discussions with communities such issues should be addressed. Various development scenarios can be considered, including the option to phase reforestation and to include species with faster returns.

Another debate took place about the extent that the political and conflict dimension negatively affects the extension of cultivated area. It was recognised that risks are a very important factor in long-term investments. It is the role of foreign parties to help local organisations and entrepreneurs to analyse and manage risks, in close cooperation with stakeholders.

The statement of one of the participants that biodiversity is more important than the scale of the projects resulted in a lively discussion. It was reiterated that the function and benefits of forests for communities are the critical starting point, irrespective of the scale. At the same time there is a need for a broader vision to achieve larger-scale impact, so both the bottom-up and top-down processes should be considered. This means that initiatives must reflect the different levels of intervention, but we should not scale up too fast, and rather work step-by-step. There are too many examples of top-down initiatives that are driven by status and unrealistic ambitions.

One of the participants wanted to know what we could learn from global experiences in community-driven projects, for example in India. A brief outline was presented, elaborating on the different political and socio-cultural contexts that apply in forestation projects in India, China, and some African countries.

The webinar ended with the conclusion that:

***Trees are good for people, planet and profit***

***but***

***You have to plant the right tree at the right time at the right spot***

***and***

***Always with- and for the people who will be the long-term stewards***

Menaqua intends to organise another webinar. We'll keep you posted!