Eco-tourism creates jobs in the Jordanian desert

Praxis’s third way

Polishing Ethiopia’s gemstone industry

Buses for Amish vacations
Jordan: a resilient nation in a troubled region

Jordan is an amazing country of stunning beauty. An oasis of stability in a region where armed conflict is a regular occurrence, this desert nation hosts the second-largest number of refugees per capita in the world.

Like the old story about engineers pronouncing that bumblebees shouldn’t be able to fly, first-time observers watch and wonder.

About four in 10 citizens live in the capital, Amman, where population more than doubled within a decade. More than 90 per cent of the country is desert. That area is home to only about five per cent of citizens.

In recent years, Jordan has become a major focus of Canadian foreign aid. This issue contains stories about Government of Canada-funded work that MEDA is doing in the country through its Jordan Valley Links project.

Investments linked to MEDA’s mission of creating business solutions to poverty are improving lives for disadvantaged individuals, families and entire communities.

Much remains to be done. As many as one in seven citizens live below the poverty line.

MEDA’s work is focused on vulnerable citizens of Jordan. Overall unemployment was running at nearly 19 per cent in mid-2018. Men had an unemployment rate of 16.6 per cent. Unemployment was close to 27 per cent for women, and as much as 30 per cent for youth (under age 30).

Our July issue will feature stories of how small grants and technical assistance are making a difference for Jordanian entrepreneurs.

Syria and Jordan

The Syrian civil war dealt a triple whammy to Jordan’s economy.

Exports and imports alike were disrupted. Over 600,000 Syrian refugees fled to their southern neighbor — the fourth major influx of refugees to Jordan in 50 years.

Before the war, Syria was Jordan’s main gateway for exporting fruits and vegetables to Turkey and Europe. Jordan sent 300 to 400 freight trucks of vegetables and fruits to Syria a day.

The World Bank estimates Jordan spends more than $2.5 billion a year (more than six per cent of gross domestic product, and one quarter of government spending) in supporting refugees, the 2019 edition of the Lonely Planet guide to Jordan says.

Even if the Syrian conflict is ending after eight years, that doesn’t mean things will go back to the way they used to be. The Jordanian economy is redeveloping. Some products that were formerly imported from Syria are now being made by Syrians living in camps in Jordan.

Some of those people are not going back to Syria.

Water and Jordan

A shortage of water is a major challenge facing Jordan, as it is for several other nations in the region.

Jordan is the fifth most water impoverished country in the world.

About 90 per cent of its rivers are being diverted. The Jordan River is barely deep enough to float a canoe at some points. The Dead Sea is receding by at least a metre a year. There are plans for a pipeline that will bring water from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea, but timelines for the start of construction have passed several times.

Unlike its neighbors, Jordan does not have oil deposits, which may have spared it from wars that have ravaged other parts of the region.

Alleviating the water shortage may be an important part of its future economic development. — MS
Features

6  **Praxis Mutual Funds:**
25 years of providing mutual fund investors with a third way

9  **Mining for Change:**
Opals poised to become major Ethiopian export
*By Katie West*

16  **Saving and lending together**
MEDA Jordan project encourages women, youth to pool resources
*By Mike Strathdee*

18  **Pioneer Trails drives for people who don’t.**
Ohio firm ferries Amish to winter vacations
*By JB Miller*
Be Grateful

Failing to recognize our dependence erodes relationship

It requires a company of angels to keep any single one of us in the life to which we are accustomed. We are each like a tightrope walker who thinks she’s balancing by sheer skill, only to find a forest of hands supporting each end of her horizontal pole and some gentle shoulders keeping her ankles steady.

As we lie in bed, the cotton in our sheets has been picked by low-paid labor; the mattress beneath us has been constructed in a factory whose conditions we seldom imagine. When we rise to take a wash, we use shampoo and soap and toothpaste from countries and cultures and climates we might shrink from if we ever troubled to discover what they were. We pour a bowl of cereal whose contents have been through many hands before they reached our kitchen, and we find a teabag whose leaves have been garnered by a person stooping for many hours in baking sun for little reward. We finger a phone or switch on a radio, the technical elements of which have been extracted from a mine whose resources dominate the economy and the politics of a country quite possibly overshadowed and pressurized in numerous ways by our own.

We head to work or college or school in a car or bus or train, burning fuel laid down over millions of years that can’t be replenished, that is extracted in demanding ways, and whose consumption in large quantities jeopardizes the well-being and even survival of people, wildlife, and the ecosphere across the world and into the indefinite future.

When and if we do work, we find ourselves part of a network of suppliers and customers, equally dependent on both, and subject to the fashions of taste or interest, the swings of the weather or the economy, and the trends of political or social ideology. More tangibly, we find ourselves paralyzed and exasperated if our boss, our colleague, or the person reporting to us is idle, inefficient, selfish, neglectful, incompetent, or disrespectful. We can do almost anything, however challenging, if we can form a good team with those around us; almost nothing, however elementary, if we can’t. When we leave a job it’s the people, not the projects, we remember; if we find joy, it’s because we did something together, with each person playing their part, deepening esteem for respective personalities and roles as we recognize it takes a village to raise a child, or a barn, or a standard.

There are plenty of parts of life we don’t want to see. If we eat an egg, we may prefer to ignore the conditions in which the chicken has been confined. If we enjoy a beef steak or veal cutlet or leg of lamb, we may close our eyes to the nature of an animal’s life, the conditions of its transport, the nature of an abattoir. We may be careful how we divide up our organic, recyclable, and general waste, but we may not ever behold the realities of how trash is disposed of; the kinds of work involved; the smells, dirt, and discomforts of doing so. We seldom ask whose sweat produced our shoes, our computer, our shirt (which we boast of having bought so cheaply); and we scarcely pause to consider, when we get a bargain, which link in the supply chain got no reward this time.

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Baptism site attracts tourists to Jordan River

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.”
(Matt 3: 13, New International Version)

T his site, Bethany beyond the Jordan, was visited by Pope John Paul II in March 2000, and named by him as the number one of eight holy sites that all Christians should try to visit.

It is recognized as the site where John the Baptist baptized Jesus. Excavation of the site in 1996 after land mines were removed confirmed this as the spot where John the Baptist lived and carried out his baptisms.

Jordan and Israel have been at peace for 25 years, but tourists have been able to visit the site only since the early part of this decade. Tourism buses must pass through military checkpoints to enter the site, which is patrolled by soldiers.

The nearby Jordan River, which is mentioned in the Bible 185 times, is now a brown, stagnant, polluted creek since its former source, the Sea of Galilee, was dammed in the 1960s. It was closed off during a short war in 1967, its banks heavily mined. While a 1994 peace treaty called for the river to be restored, its current flow is only about two per cent of the level prior to the 1967 conflict.

A recent article in Christianity Today magazine notes efforts by Christian environmentalists to clean up the river and asks whether restoring the Jordan River could build peace in the region. The river once fed the Dead Sea, which is now shrinking by about a metre a year.◆
GOSHEN, IND — Investors who believe that the bottom line should include considerations of people and planet, as well as profit, have often fallen into one of two camps.

On one side, there are progressive investment companies focused on issues related to environment, social and governance issues (ESG, a term that has overtaken socially responsible investing, or SRI, as the common industry buzzword). Those investors are motivated by an ideal that doesn’t stem from religious convictions.

On another side, a series of mutual fund families motivated by faith concerns sprung up, reflecting more traditional, conservative values that emphasize negative screening or avoidance of certain things.

Praxis Mutual Funds, which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, walks a middle path, says company president Chad Horning. “From the very beginning, like Anabaptists, we have been a third way for people.”

When Praxis launched its first fund offerings in early 1994, there were few options for people who wanted to ensure their investments did not conflict with their values.

Praxis is part of the Everence Financial group of companies. Everence Capital Management is the Advisor to the Praxis Mutual Funds.

Praxis was set up to extend Everence predecessor Mennonite Mutual Aid’s asset management services to the people in the pews. “It clearly came out of the faith,” Horning said. Praxis’ founders were concerned with “how would a Mennonite integrate their faith into their investments?”

Carving out that niche hasn’t always been easy. Some progressive groups view Praxis as being too religious, while more conservative groups are concerned Praxis may be too liberal.

“Praxis has been able, I think, to drive down that middle, not without some tensions, but to appeal to a broad swath of people,” Horning said.

The company has enough customers in each of those camps that the firm has been able to continue to grow, he said. Parent firm Everence serves two dozen different religious denominations that span the theological spectrum.

Praxis had assets under management of $1.279 billion at the end of 2018, down slightly from $1.308 billion a year earlier. While the company had strong sales during the year, declining markets took a toll at year-end before rebounding in early 2019.


The firm now has five funds plus three additional fund of funds that invest in the underlying five.

One of the growing edges for the company is its fixed income fund, known as the impact bond fund (formerly intermediate income).

Over the past five years, Praxis has participated in the market for bonds issued by governments and others that have specific financial and social goals attached to them, such as sustainable energy.

These instruments are broadly known as green bonds, although that description is somewhat misleading as it refers to one specific niche, Horning said.

Close to 30 percent of Praxis’s assets are invested in positive impact bonds issued by organizations such as the World Bank, benefiting social concerns that include housing and renewable energy.

“We believe we can do this and not have to settle for concessionary (less than market) rates.”
Praxis is often told it is a too-well kept secret and asked, “Where have you been?”

“What we have been trying to do to stem that tsunami of ESG is be better at telling stories, and for people who care about this sort of thing, helping their financial advisor connect them with the stories.”

Praxis’s business strategy can’t just be about screening, be it negative or positive based on how companies act, as mutual funds are sold, not bought, he said. It is trying to equip financial advisors to ask clients if they want their faith incorporated into the investment recommendation being brought to them.

“It’s the stories that make the difference.”

One of the business challenges Praxis is grappling with is how to tap a millennial generation who shares the values promoted by its products but may struggle to afford them. “Millennials have more choice in what they support, and they support it with maybe a little less devotion, but they care.”

Praxis has begun allowing people to buy its funds from its website, without paying the historic five per cent front end load commission that is paid to agents.

The company plans online marketing to specific groups of people who won’t threaten advisors. The campaign will target people who have done business with the Everence Credit Union who don’t have connections to Everence’s traditional faith communities, but who may have interest in Praxis. “We’re going to start there.”

Praxis has responded well to trends. Horning wishes they could be a bit better at anticipating them.

“I don’t worry about us being part of the bleeding edge. We’re part of an insurance company, that our DNA has us do all the financial analyses first.”

“We have some opportunities to try some new things, to people who don’t know what impact investing is. It’s pretty obvious that that is the thing that is next.”

UN development goals provide opportunities, challenges for Praxis

For MEDA and many other organizations in the international development sector, explaining how projects support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is an ongoing and important part of telling their story.

The SDGs were set by the UN General Assembly in 2015, an effort to reach a series of targets by 2030. They cover social and economic development issues related to poverty, gender equality, climate action, decent work and economic growth and affordable and clean energy, among others.

At first glance, it might seem that the global movement to achieve these goals would be completely in synch with a faith-based mutual fund company such as Praxis.

But the reality is more complicated, says Praxis president Chad Horning. The UN’s SDGs are not all about corporate performance. “They’re about development. There’s some altruism to them.”

“These goals, while high-faluting and difficult to attain, bring values, faith or otherwise, altruism, back into this (SDGS investment) conversation in a way that we’re happy to see.”

Returning investors’ focus to people, planet, prosperity and peace are good things, he said. “We welcome that.”

The United Nations principles for responsible investment and the movement to incorporate environmental, social and governance (ESG) considerations into investment decisions have brought many players with similar motivations into the industry.

The rate at which others in the industry buy into this approach could either be good news or a challenge to Praxis.

“We’re validated in a way, but we’re also subsumed, potentially, by this big thing.”

Praxis and its parent Everence Financial contribute to the responsible investment movement by buying positive impact bonds that have an international focus to them. As an example, he noted that early in this decade, the European Development Bank agreed to fund immunizations in the developing world, offering a bond to the markets so they could do the work over 18 months rather than 10 years.

“The way we describe what Praxis does, what Everence does broadly is this thing called stewardship investing.”

Lessons Everence and Praxis take from the Bible’s teachings about money are productivity and responsibility. “Clearly, the Bible tells us to be responsible, think about our actions and the impacts of the way we use our money.”

Managing the tension between productivity and responsibility occasionally requires difficult conversations, he said.
Towards a more sustainable economic system

Everence researcher engages companies in social change

Chris Meyer dreams big dreams. “I would love to see our global financial system be transformed into a more sustainable structure that accounts for the human and environmental impacts of our economy, not just the short-term financial effort,” says the Ohio man, who works as manager of stewardship investing research and advocacy for Everence Financial/Praxis Mutual Funds. “I hope to be part of that transformation.”

Meyer, who joined Everence in 2006, works on shareholder advocacy, focusing on environmental sustainability, working to end modern slavery and addressing inequality.

Most of the corporate dialogues he engages in involve collaboration with other faith-based and socially responsible investors. He has been part of efforts that involve as many as 20 investor participants. Most are smaller groups representing three to eight organizations.

Everence typically chooses to join or start dialogues based on its shareholder advocacy plan, which is periodically updated, he said.

Meyer is a member of the Interfaith Centre on Corporate Responsibility’s climate change leadership team. The ICCR is a coalition of institutional investors who try to use their investments as catalysts for social change. Everence has been part of that coalition for over 20 years and does most of its shareholder advocacy in collaboration with other ICCR members.

A recent success Meyer cites is a two-year dialogue with an Indiana gas and electric utility that resulted in the utility agreeing to retire all its coal generation plants by 2028. As that capacity is replaced with renewable energy, NiSource’s carbon emissions will fall by more than 90 per cent.

A four-year dialogue with Hershey resulted in the company agreeing to source environmentally sustainable, certified cocoa for all its global chocolate product lines, and to strengthen its programs to eradicate child labor in the cocoa industry.

A more recent effort involves Praxis and other shareholders asking AT&T to explain how it is combating online child sexual exploitation.

Progress with companies can be slow and frustrating, he admits. “There are an unlimited number of issues that can be addressed to make the world more sustainable and just. And I know that a small policy change made by a company can affect millions of people. So, for me, it can be tough to harmonize the unlimited potential for impact through my work with the need to live a balanced life.”

Photo by Todd Kaminski, courtesy of Everence

Chris Meyer cleans solar panels that provide electricity for his home in rural Ohio.

Chris Meyer cleans solar panels that provide electricity for his home in rural Ohio.
Job creation with polished stones

Ethiopian project provides opportunities in gemstones

By Katie West

Ethiopia is an emerging economy with the potential to become an economic powerhouse in East Africa. It is also home to one of the largest opal reserves in the world. The country has deposits of over 40 coloured gemstones including aquamarine, jasper, agate, amethyst, emerald and more.

Since the discovery of the opal in the mid-1990s, Ethiopia has become the second-largest exporter of opals after Australia. Most of them are destined for China and India.

But the Ethiopian gemstone industry faces a challenge — the gap between the skills required on the job and the actual skills possessed by employees. This is a common problem across many industries throughout the continent.

The World Bank has noted that the skills gap in Sub-Saharan Africa is a critical issue for governments to tackle in order to boost innovation and technology. This critical gap in Ethiopia spans all demographics. The groups most affected are women and youth.

Finding suitably skilled workers is a problem facing the gemstone and lapidary sectors.

A lapidary is a person who cuts, polishes, or engraves gems, or is a dealer in precious or semiprecious stones.

Lapidaries are an integral part of the gemstone supply chain. In Ethiopia, they face many challenges due to the lack of technical training, qualified laborers or local demand for their regionally sourced gemstones. Although awareness of Ethiopia’s gemstone sector has grown internationally, in country, it remains virtually unknown. As a result, perceiving gemstones as a potential commodity and new market opportunity is a relatively new concept. Countries like India, China and Sri Lanka have been mining for gemstones for centuries. This new understanding of the gemstone industry’s potential has left Ethiopia in a rush to catch up with the growing international industry.

“As the gemstone sector grows, there is so much potential for jobs,” says Aderaw Dagnew, MEDA’s gemstone expert.

“Right now, Ethiopia has a very large, underemployed youth population. The gemstone sector has the potential to create many jobs for this demographic and it can also bring in foreign currency and development to the country.”

MEDA might have a solution to the problem: helping to strengthen the gemstone value chain in Ethiopia through a Canadian grant program and investing in the technical training colleges that teach lapidary skills.

MEDA connects to the Ethiopian gemstone industry through its EMERTA (Ethiopians Motivating Rough-cut gemstones...
Enterprises to Rise in Trade and Agri-business) project.

The project aims to increase agri-business performance, medium and small enterprise business performance while improving the business and policy environment in the northern Amhara region of Ethiopia by training lapidary experts, filling the skill gap and supporting government policy reform.

This is no small task.

In Ethiopia, the value chain might look something like this:

A miner, usually a man, harvests opals and other semi-precious stones with little more than a pick-axe. He lacks equipment and proper training. He is exposed to significant health and safety risks. His motivation is usually survival, not profit.

He is often part of a miner’s association, which sells the stones to a broker. These brokers often make inflated profits due to the miners’ lack of awareness about the true value of rough stones and a limited number of potential buyers.

The lapidaries buy the stones from the broker. They then cut, polish, engrave, set and sell the gemstones.

“It is important to note that many of Ethiopia’s gemstones leave the country in their rough form to have their value added elsewhere,” said Thomas McCormack, MEDA’s field project manager in Ethiopia. “Therefore, the full potential of the stones is not realized in the country.”

Bunna Bank is a credit union that makes credit accessible to small lapidary firms.

MEDA has invested $560,000 USD in Bunna and shares risk with the bank. Currently, the bank has approved 43 loans with the aver-
The gemstone sector has the potential to create many jobs (for youth).

The EMERTA program, which is funded by Global Affairs Canada, also facilitates grants to entrepreneurs. These grants are focused on EMERTA’s three key sectors: rice, vegetables and gemstones.

Metasebia Asfaw hopes to receive a grant from the program. Asfaw is the founder and general manager of Lalibela Gemstones and Jewelry, a small lapidary business in city of Lalibela in northern Ethiopia.

Asfaw is a serial entrepreneur who owns multiple businesses in Lalibela, including the Mountain View Hotel. Last year, he learned about the potential of the gemstone sector and decided that he wanted to expand his entrepreneurial efforts into the lapidary sector. He launched a small business with several faceting machines, which are used to cut, shape and polish the stones.

In 2018, he heard about MEDA and their grant program for entrepreneurs. He decided to apply for a grant with the hopes to use it to buy more lapidary equipment, safety supplies and hire additional staff members. He hopes to provide training to them through MEDA’s workshops facilitated by local lapidary college programs.

Asfaw is passionate about creating opportunities. He currently has three staff members working for him in his lapidary business. As he expands, he hopes to hire more workers — especially women. “In Ethiopia, many women stay home to care for their families,” he said. “This is important, but I also think they should come work with us. We will provide them with training and a viable income that will help them support their families,” he says.

“The gemstone sector has the potential to create many jobs (for youth).”

The gemstone sector is a challenging space to work in. With MEDA supporting intermediaries like Bunna Bank, providing grants through the Canadian government and technical training to fill the lapidary skills gap, the gemstone sector in Ethiopia has the potential to bring foreign currency to the country and employ a burgeoning youth population. As the lapidary value chain develops, Ethiopia is poised to expand their gemstone sector to the international market.

Katie West is a communications coordinator in MEDA’s Waterloo office, responsible for the MEDAZINE e-publication and MEDA’s social media channels.
Making a living in southern Jordan’s remote desert is not an easy task.

The Feynan Ecolodge, an environmentally-friendly tourist destination in a nature reserve, makes that a lot easier for people who live here.

At least 80 families, a total of 400 people, benefit directly or indirectly from the off-the-grid EcoLodge, whose 26 rooms can accommodate 60 guests. Staff and suppliers, full or part-time, are members of the local community.

Lodge employees, 40 drivers who provide shuttle transportation, Bedouin tour guides, bakers and suppliers of food and other goods are among those benefiting from Feynan’s operation. Most food purchases, vegetarian in keeping with the local diet, come from within 18.6 miles (30 km) of the lodge, to try and keep benefits as local as possible.

There is a candle workshop onsite where local women produce candles that are used to supply light at the lodge, and a leather workshop. The lodge is working to develop economic projects predominantly focused on women, who live in a traditional, patriarchal society.

The lodge was started to sustain the community “but it’s the community that sustains this place,” says Nabil Tarazi, founder and managing director of the EcoHotels firm that operates Feynan.

Visitors keep “coming here for the experience, and that’s what the community gives. A very rich, authentic experience that you can only have at Feynan.”

People who are fortunate enough to enjoy Feynan hospitality plan ahead. Getting to the Ecolodge involves a three-hour bus ride from the capital, Amman, a transfer of luggage to pickup trucks, and another 35 minutes or so bouncing along winding, rocky paths. While the lodge is less than 19 miles from the world-renowned Petra heritage site as the crow flies, arriving by roads requires travelling twice the distance.

The lodge was opened in 2005 by Jordan’s Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN).

The RSCN was founded by hunters, who realized in 1966 that there was nothing left to hunt. Named the royal society because of the Jordanian King’s patronage, it got the mandate to run nature reserves and has grown to 320 employees. It currently oversees 10 protected nature reserves throughout the country, with another six proposed.

RSCN started developing tourism ventures in its protected areas in 1994. “Helping nature, helping people” is the RSCN tagline.

The organization adopted eco-tourism as a tool for conservation. Income generated from tourism goes to conservation work and economic opportunities for the surrounding communities, largely impoverished areas.
A few years after the RCSN launched Feynan, Nabil Tarazi started his EcoHotels company and partnered with RSCN to run the ecodge.

He recognized that since the lodge had few activities, visitors were unlikely to stay more than one night. So, he worked to change the site from a hotel to a destination with things for people to do once they arrived (see story, pg. 14)

“We’re not a charity, we’re a business,” he said. “But we’re a social business that cares about the environment.”

The lodge aims to show that eco-tourism is a viable alternative to mining.

Roughly half of revenue paid by guests stays in the local community, not including amounts that go back to RSCN for its conservation work.

UM Khalid, a 29-year-old Bedouin mother of six who lives a 10-minute walk from the lodge, runs a bakery business out of her goat herding tent.

She has supplied bread to the lodge since 2005, earning a profit of between 300 and 400 or 500 Jordanian dinar a month ($424, $565, or $706 USD) by working three hours a day, depending on the season. That is well above the Jordanian minimum wage of about 210 JD a month for a full-time job.

Supplying the lodge has changed her life, she said. That income has helped her to put photovoltaic cells on her goat herd tent. Those panels provide electricity for a washing machine, a machine that assists in making butter, and light for her children to study at night.

Solar power helps her family enjoy modern comforts while still living in the rural area rather than moving to the city.

With her additional income, she has also switched to propane gas for making bread, which is cleaner than the wood-burning stove she previously used.

MEDA’s Jordan Valley Links project, which is funded by the Government of Canada, provided Feynan with a grant to install a larger solar system at the ecodge. Limited cooling and refrigeration during hot summer months meant few visitors and little work for the community up to five months of the year.

Each summer, a desert site 1,148 feet (350 metres) above sea level gets extremely hot and uncomfortable. Tarazi was forced to post warnings to that effect on the Feynan website, depressing lodge occupancy to single-digit levels.

Feynan previously had a solar system that would generate 18-20 KwH of energy a day, enough to power only lightbulbs in bathrooms and two small refrigerators. A new system that went live last August is six times the size. It can generate 120KWh of energy daily, powering fans in each guest room and six additional fridges and freezers. Water for showers is also solar heated.

Feynan is now getting tour bookings for the month of June, which never ever happened before, Tarazi said. “We’re open for business in the summer.”

MEDA’s assistance will allow Feynan to increase employment, support the development of more micro-businesses targeting women and youth, and increase environmental awareness and education, he said.

That could lead Tarazi to add another eight or nine full-time employees to the current 22 staff.

The larger impact will be in developing the ecosystem of micro-businesses that provide services to the lodge and its guests, he said.◆
Nabil Tarazi wants to move people’s vacations from sightseeing to sight doing, or experiential travel.

Tarazi, founder and managing director of EcoHotels, is also treasurer and an executive board member of the Global EcoTourism Network. The network encourages people to seek out destinations where their spending will support local communities and not just international hotel chains.

He believes everyone benefits when travellers “go places and meet people, learn about the community.”

“What we do here at Feynan, and any project we get involved with is experiential travel.”

Feynan has won many international honors for its approach, with awards from National Geographic, Trip Advisor and Traveller’s Choice.

Over the past nine years, Tarazi has worked to change Feynan from just a hotel to a destination where people can spend several days exploring.

A group of MEDA supporters who visited the lodge in February were treated to several hikes in the surrounding desert. A sunset hike included climbing hills overlooking the Jordan portion of the Rift Valley. The Great Rift Valley is a contiguous geographic trench, approximately 6,000 kilometres (3,700 miles) in length, that runs from Lebanon to Mozambique in Southeastern Africa.

That hike included a tea service over an open fire, and a discussion about the ecological devastation caused by Romans who occupied what is now Jordan more than 2,000 years ago. After the Romans found copper deposits, they needed to heat rocks to 1,200 degrees to extract the small percentage of copper. To fuel the needed fires, slaves deforested the area, which became polluted with smog. Evidence of the slag is still visible.

So much burning happened in this process that recently researchers found carbon in the Arctic ice cap that they dated back to Feynan.

On a second hike, visitors were shown the harsh beauty of the desert canyons, herds of goats tended by Bedouin families, and the practical neces-
The white broom tree is used to heal wolf bites on goats, as well as treating back pain and providing mattresses for baby goats and fasteners for tents, Hasaseen said.

Ascending a steep rock face as if it were small stairs, he cut off a small piece of another plant, ground it up and mixed it with a capful of water to show how it can be used for washing hands or clothes.

Hasaseen, who was born and raised a short distance from the ecododge, spoke limited English when he began working for Feynan in 2011. Through practice and frequent exposure to visitors, he is now the lodge’s most fluent English speaker, Tarazi said.

On clear nights, guests are given a rooftop tour of the night sky, what Feynan calls “some of the best stargazing in Jordan.”

Other explorations can include spending the day with a local shepherd learning about goat herding, scrambling through dramatic slot canyons, mountain biking, exploring 11,000-year-old archaeological sites that go back to the earliest civiliza-

tions, or making traditional Arabic dishes with the lodge’s chef.

A highlight of a MEDA visit to Feynan in February was a coffee ceremony held in a Bedouin elder’s goat herd tent. Coffee is highly regarded, but a luxury rather than an everyday beverage in Bedouin culture.

Mixed with ground cardamom pods and heated over an open fire, coffee made in the Bedouin ceremony is used to welcome visitors, settle disputes and as part of marriage proposal meetings.

All these activities support the local communities. Feynan rotates through area families who receive income from hosting visitors. Jobs are hard to come by in an impoverished region where opportunities are scarce.

Jordan’s official unemployment rate is 18 per cent, but it is over 23 per cent for women, and as high as 30 per cent for people under the age of 30.

Providing employment opportunities for more people will require more efforts to promote secondary tourist sites such as Feynan, says Ahsan-ul-Haque Helal, country director for MEDA’s Jordan Valley Links project.

“Most of the tourists, their primary destination is either Petra (south of Feynan) or Aqaba (the country’s only coastal city),” he said.

Tarazi is convinced that the work he has done at Feynan is transferable. He plans to try the model elsewhere. “When I first started, I was never interested in doing just one lodge.”

Geopolitical instability earlier this decade led to a slump in tourism, forcing him to focus on Feynan’s survival. More recently, he has done consulting for a project near Petra that will eventually become a lodge. In northern Jordan near Umm Qais, the company that owns the Movenpick chain wants to develop a project around a hot springs area.

Tarazi is about to sign a management agreement for the latter project. “We will not replicate the exact activities. Each one will have its own identity, but it’s following that same ethos.”

He has also had inquiries from a group in Sudan and was prepared to fly there this spring to investigate until the latest political crisis put that effort on hold. ◆
For many Jordanians, the ideas of saving, and using a bank to do so, are unfamiliar concepts. People who earn money on a seasonal basis spend in the winter what they have earned in the summer. Wealthier Jordanians may save a significant portion of their income, investing in gold or land. Others just try to get by.

A 2017 financial inclusion report by Jordan’s central bank found that only 33 per cent of adults reported having an account at a financial institution.

In rural areas, “people are not aware of the importance of saving,” says Eithar Ghouli, access to finance specialist with MEDA’s Jordan Valley Links project.

Only once children graduate from public schools and start going to universities do families realize the need for having extra money.

Lacking access to capital also prevents people from starting businesses that could raise their family’s standard of living.

MEDA and two other organizations have partnered to improve access to finance for 10,000 women and youth. The Jordan Development Foundation and the National Association for Family Empowerment are working with MEDA to create 500 savings and loan groups.

The effort aims to have 15 to 26 youth and women in each group. Those groups will meet weekly for a year, to save, make loans and learn new skills to overcome issues that limit them from having their own businesses.

Ten per cent of the group will move to working with banks and microfinance institutions to gain access to even more capital.

The savings and loan circle approach strives to create and mobilize local resources instead of looking to an outside source of finding money. Another goal is to get participants to work together collectively. In Jordan, people tend to focus more on individual work.

Groups are self-selecting, which builds trust. And the meetings are serious affairs. Some groups fine members who come late, fail to attend or talk during meetings.

A leader, treasurer and secretary are elected for each group. They help to make decisions on the amount of each share of savings, loans once enough money has been saved, and details of the bylaws.

Participants learn skills needed to start a business: marketing, innovation, market assessments, packaging, feasibility studies and cash flow.

Another area of training encompasses soft skills such as communication and problem solving, working with clients.

Each group has a savings box that is secured by three locks. Each of the three group leaders have a key to one of the locks. All the locks are different, and the box is opened only at meetings.

Every member gets a passbook that is stamped to record their deposits. Even women who cannot read and write can understand the stamps.

Women save between one and five Jordanian dinars ($1.41 to $7.05 USD) each week.

After the group has built its collective savings to 800 or 900 dinars, likely in three months time, it will begin lending. The group approves loan requests, typically in the range of 100 to 200 dinars.

Within the first six months of the two-year effort, organizers have reached 30 per cent of their target population.

Shekah Malkany is a farmer who has volunteered in various community initiatives. Eight savings and loan groups have developed out of one that she started in her village of Koura, population 4,000, 80 kilometres (50 miles) north of Amman.

“She started with one group, and the other seven were (developed out of) the reputation of other people telling about the group,” Ghouli said. “Each
group was becoming easier.”

Groups appeal as people want to form businesses but realize they can’t do it on their own, she said.

Malkany found that mobilizing women is sometimes challenging. When the project discussed shares, women thought that means investment in stocks and needed convincing.

Of the eight groups, only three women have dropped out. Two groups formed late in 2018, with the rest being formed in January.

Malkany, a mother of nine, had three years when she had three children in university. There are now two teachers, three engineers, a nurse and a doctor in her family.

The average family in Jordan has four or five children. People who live in Amman may have only one or two children, while those who live in rural areas have six or seven.

There are a variety of reasons why many Jordanians lack access to banking services, Ghouli said.

Taking deposits and loans are considered Haram (an Arabic term that means forbidden) under Islam due to taking of interest. Islamic financial institutions “take more interest, under another name” and will not calculate the total cost of their service fees, she said.

Lack of trust in the system is one of the problems. In rural areas, there are no banks.

Electronic banking is available through a mobile phone-based system called JOMOPAY, which stands for Jordan Mobile Payments. But this app-based system is not connected well to other telecom systems, can only be used to send money to other JOMOPAY users, and is not user-friendly, Ghouli said.

People’s reluctance to adopt technology is an additional hurdle to wider adoption of this system, she said. In many cases, they prefer to hand off cash.

“People are not open to technology,” she said. “Technology in general is new to the country.”

Savings and loan groups appeal as people want to form businesses but realize they can’t do it on their own.

Many of MEDA’s rural clients have smart phones but use them just for taking photos, not for exploring new opportunities.

Helpful as the savings circles can be for participants, the project has faced challenges. Other non-profits have offered financial incentives, such as transportation money, for attending training sessions.

The Syrian crisis has played a role in this problem. Large amounts of short-term relief money is coming into the country to help Syrians, funds that are desperately needed since Jordan is one of the countries most affected by the number of displaced Syrians.

Jordan has the second highest share of refugees compared to its population in the world, 89 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants, United Nations figures suggest. Almost 90 per cent of the 751,000 refugees living in Jordan are from Syria. Nearly 50,000 refugees have active work permits, the UN High Commission on Refugees says.

The inflow of relief money upsets development aimed at Jordanians, Ghouli said.
While operating an automobile collision-repair business in the 1980’s, David Swartzentruber began renting vans to drivers who provided transportation services for the Holmes County, Ohio-area Amish. During winter months, many of these vans were traveling to Pinecraft, a small community in Sarasota, Florida.

Sensing a business opportunity, Swartzentruber and a partner who is no longer involved, purchased a 47-passenger bus in 1984. The resulting company, Pioneer Trails, has been providing long distance rides for the Amish ever since.

The Amish are a conservative, traditional Anabaptist group who do not drive automobiles. They believe having speedy, convenient transportation will lead to spending more time away from family, home and the community.

Initially, Pioneer Trails existed to provide transportation for the area’s plain people to the Pinecraft community. Swartzentruber couldn’t have dreamed how the firm would grow in three and a half decades.

“The drivers are the face of our company,” Swartzentruber stated. “They interact with our customers and our motto for them is, ‘safety first no exceptions.’ We always want to treat customers and employees as we would want to be treated. My Christian faith is the top of everything. That’s who I am, and that’s what I want the company to represent.”
Employees come with various work experiences. After a 30-year career in education, dispatcher Matt McMullen began as a part-time driver while finishing his PhD dissertation. On the day McMullen successfully defended his dissertation, he was offered a full-time office position, which he accepted. “It seemed like the right thing to do and I have never regretted it. The Swartzentrubers are a great family to work for, amazingly generous and kind people.”

Leon Miller, a retired business owner from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is a part-time driver who spends winters in Sarasota and wanted something to do. “I was always fascinated with driving big things, and I thought this would be fun,” he noted. “The company is great to work for, and the other drivers are a good bunch of people. It’s been great.”

David’s son Wendyl, age 45, joined Pioneer Trails in 1999. Over time, his father, who is now 73, has been turning over the company’s management responsibilities to him with the goal that he will become owner this year.

Wendyl learned some company basics growing up. “I started out washing buses when I was 12 years old,” he said. He hadn’t considered the business ownership until his 1999 return. “Coming back, I did many of the jobs necessary to run a bus company, except drive a bus.” With those tasks, Wendyl recalls his father’s lessons - keep it simple, it doesn’t have to be too complicated. “Make sure you have good drivers and equipment and treat your employees and customers well. That’s the best advertising we can do.”

Lori Yoder, a young woman from Millersburg, Ohio was all smiles when she recently arrived in Pinecraft with a friend. “This has been my sixth or seventh time coming on the bus. I love the convenience, it’s easy and there’s nothing to worry about,” she explained. “The bus comes right to Pinecraft. I’m here where it’s warm, and I’m looking forward to going to the beach.”

While the company has become more than David had envisioned, he credits Wendyl for the company’s growth over the past decade. “Getting to the age, that I am, I didn’t think it was that important to grow, but I knew if Wendyl wanted the business, he would want it to grow. That’s why we expanded.”

With Wendyl in charge, David and his wife, Irene, enjoy spending the winter months in Pinecraft. There, he meets many of the arriving coaches, welcoming and helping passengers with their luggage.

Looking to the future, Wendyl referenced the past and how his father modeled generosity by giving back to the community. “Whether it’s free tickets to Florida for benefit auctions or giving free transportation to people traveling to Florida in wheelchairs, he’s been very giving, and I plan to keep those traditions going,” he said.

While providing transportation for the Amish to Florida is a very small part of Pioneer Trails’ business today, it laid the foundation for a company that has lived up to its slogan, “Our Business is Going Places.”

JB Miller, a frequent contributor to The Marketplace, rode Pioneer Trails from Ohio to Florida this past winter.
Clean Money Revolution: Reinventing Power, Purpose and Capitalism

By Carolyn Burns


“Put your money where your heart is. Give yourself permission to invest in what you care about.”

That creed is what makes investor Joel Solomon’s The Clean Money Revolution such a transformative read. Personal finance is often described as an agitating and taboo subject, yet Solomon attacks it in a highly personable and compelling manner. His simple questioning of “How much is enough?” and “Where does your money spend the night?” illustrates his heightened awareness of modern capitalism’s disconnect from ethical considerations.

“We can no longer pretend that we’re morally detached from the stocks and bonds we invest in, if the companies in which we own shares are doing damage. It is our responsibility to know, and to act accordingly.” It’s a message worth repeating. It should come as no surprise that Solomon’s book centers on one request — that readers repurpose their capital to regenerate the world and achieve social equity.

Solomon begins his memoir/insider’s guide/manifesto by describing how he embraced the challenges and opportunities of participating in the clean money revolution, defined as any money “aligned with a purpose beyond self-interest.” His weapon of choice against the world’s ills is cash and, more specifically, investment into products, services and people.

Solomon has witnessed the power of deploying capital with the intention of producing positive system-level changes. “For over thirty years I’ve been helping businesses and investors shift their money and awareness from a strictly utilitarian or default approach focused on ‘highest return rate’ toward a mission-based, regenerative approach,” he says.

His is a long track record in the Canadian impact investing field, one that should come as no surprise that Solomon’s book centers on one request — that readers repurpose their capital to regenerate the world and achieve social equity.

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His is a long track record in the Canadian impact investing field, one that illustrates how clean money is not a passing trend. Rather, it’s a lifelong commitment to doing good while doing well; a morally charged sentiment that leaves readers with much to aspire to.

Solomon is quick to explain that the winner-takes-all model of traditional capitalism is both outdated and unsustainable. Humanity has over-reached the carrying capacity of nature; likewise, philanthropy has failed to deliver enough resources to those in need to help fight off injustice. By contrast, the strategic application of clean money seeks to provide an alternative future whereby both people and the planet are reinforcing each other and winning together.

Two massive global forces are fuelling the clean money movement. The first element is the conscious consumption, also known as “green” or a lifestyles of health and sustainability trend that advocates for consumers to purchase products and services aiming to create a better future for everyone. The second factor is the massive wealth transfer from Boomers to Generation X and Millennials.

Yet Solomon stresses that the dire state of the world requires an all-encompassing clean money revolution as a sort of global movement that welcomes “every willing hand, heart and mind.” No one can be left behind.

This inclusivity is best exemplified by Solomon’s belief that those who go searching for chances to invest their money cleanly will find them. He uses the book as a platform to chronicle the evolution in clean money approaches, stretching from the pioneering efforts of the Calvert Foundation’s socially responsible investing activities to Ben and Jerry’s unwavering commitment to social and environmental causes.

A sampling of networks and resources (Business for Social Responsibility; Net Impact; Investors Circle; Business Alliance for Local Living Economies) also illustrates the breadth and vibrancy of clean money opportunities, though the pace of progress will only be accelerated by more champions entering the move-
Shifting capital from destructive to regenerative uses is a necessary element of the new global economy.

Yet despite the differences in the execution of these models, “We all have a role,” Solomon stresses: “We are responsible for future generations [so] find your purpose. Connect your actions to it.”

By describing and analyzing the who, what, when, where and — most importantly — why of clean money, Solomon has given readers a powerful tool to help guide their own efforts to build a more sustainable global economy. Readers will put the book down feeling better informed and energized to deploy their capital in high impact products and services. And, consequently, to reimagine the future in a more positive light.

The Clean Money Revolution concludes with a $100 trillion vision; a list of foundational elements required for a resilient future civilization. At the top of the 16-point list are some usual suspects: fair taxation; equality of gender, race, class and sexual preference; a global carbon pricing plan. But while he admits that his methodology of tallying the costs of these items to a tidy sum of $100 trillion is symbolic, Solomon’s conclusion is still noteworthy: shifting capital from destructive to regenerative uses is a necessary element of the new global economy. His argument for a cross-generational, cross-regional legacy movement to restore the planet and achieve equality in society is persuasive.

More people, it seems, just need to care.

Carolyn Burns is manager of partnerships and innovation at MEDA’s headquarters in Waterloo, ON.
Soundbites

Investing for Development

Financial firms are embracing people’s desire to invest in ways that support social change, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The Swell Impact 400, which launched at the end of July 2018, is a customizable portfolio made up of firms that address at least one of the UN SDGs.

An “impact investing platform,” Swell was incubated with Pacific Life, a 150-year-old California life insurance company.

Swell says firms in the Impact 400 portfolio score highly on one or more third-party Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) rating methodologies, and demonstrate strong diversity and inclusion practices, as well as deriving revenue from business aligned with the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals.

◆ Improving the user experience at Ford

Ever struggled with a product or a user manual and wondered why a company didn’t make more effort to consider the end user in the design?

Ford Motor Company seems to have taken that lament into consideration when it determined who will steer the organization into a new era.

Why Ford Hired A Furniture Maker as CEO, a story in the March issue of The Atlantic magazine, examines how the automaker came to hire Jim Hackett, who ran office furniture firm Steelcase for 20 years.

Part of Ford’s thinking is that simplifying and perfecting the interaction between person and machine is the key to future success, particularly when it comes to the driverless cars of the future.

◆ Water, power and improved credit via blockchain

Ask your neighbor about Blockchain and the Internet of Things, and you may not get an answer about their practical application.

Swiss technology firm BitLumens uses these technologies to provide off-grid solar power and create access to water, electricity and financial inclusion in rural areas of developing-
nations, including Central America, southeast Asia and East Africa. The company’s devices form microgrids in places with no existing infrastructure. Its software collects data and sends it to the blockchain. People can decide to make this data available to banks for microcredits and other financial services.

A woman cooks Taboon, a traditional Middle Eastern flatbread, during a MEDA board visit to Jordan in February.
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