

Special report: Making change happen in Jordan  
Words: David Petie

# Making change happen in Jordan

Three business graduates visited Jordan as part of the Mowgli Foundation's initiative to mentor entrepreneurs in the Middle East. One, MBA graduate **David Petie**, describes their experience...

**The mentors and mentees had set out in the early evening to follow the wadi down the valley to watch the sunset. As we passed by the school and a small mosque we became entangled in the Bedouin children's game of football that seemed to straddle the footpath. Watching these local kids run barefoot across one the roughest landscapes I have ever seen made me wince.**

Like the surface of Mars, the terrain in the Dana Biosphere Reserve in Jordan is red, rocky, and arid. We

were staying in the Feynan Eco Lodge, an amazing hotel set deep in the Dana Mountains, remote and isolated: a great retreat from the modern world. It had been chosen by the Mowgli Foundation to host a mentoring programme which brings UK business people together with Jordanian entrepreneurs.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, takes human form as an older man to help Telemachus in his quest to find his father: this older man was called Mentor. Most people can think of

someone who has helped them on their journey through life in an informal way. For some it might have been one of their parents, a beloved uncle or respected teacher. It may have been a different person at a different stage in their life. People who have had mentors need no convincing that mentoring can be a powerful, life-changing experience. It is also a low-cost alternative to massive government programmes, training schemes and other ill-conceived charitable endeavours. It offers people who are concerned

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about inequality a real opportunity to make a difference.

The Mowgli Foundation is a charity that facilitates mentoring relationships between successful business people in the UK and entrepreneurs in developing countries. Their focus at the moment happens to be the Levant with programmes in Jordan and Lebanon. I was part of a group of six UK business people brought to the mountains of Jordan in December last year to act as mentor to a young Jordanian. I came across the programme through The Open University's LinkedIn Group and thought the experience would be interesting. As it turned out I was one of three OUBS MBA graduates in Jordan on that particular trip.

Derek Watson MBA (Open) was our coach during the six days we were in Jordan. He studied with The Open University Business School while he was in the Royal Air Force in preparation for civilian life. Derek is a bit of a high flyer, with more than 3,000 hours in Tornados, starting as a pilot during the Falklands War and finishing with commanding his own squadron.

Derek is a champion of mentoring and believes his MBA has helped him enormously. He said: "I did the Creativity, Innovation and Change module and it encouraged us to be open and receptive to completely wacky ideas: left field, right field, whatever... It is brilliant for this kind

of thing because there is no such thing as a stupid question.

"The other thing is the business skill: there is a great deal of discussion about the application of the MBA in its own right in developing countries, all the theoretical stuff. It is a great way to apply the learning in a new context. Taking the theory and applying it to your own business is one thing, but you have an opportunity of playing with someone else's business in a completely different way. I think this is exciting and enjoyable: it is about being creative, challenging and supportive.

"You can have a bit of fun with it as well. I have to say it is just a unique way of applying the theory. In Jordan there is a lot of business language used so people aren't averse to using theory to explain a situation or analyse a problem."

The range of business ideas the Jordanian team came up with was astounding. From healthcare systems solutions to eco tourism, there was something for everyone. My mentee, Amjad Hashem, was setting up a business to develop applications for mobile devices. Since the trip to Feynan last December we have communicated via the internet to discuss a variety of issues, from an application for a grant to cash flow projections.

The Jordanians had been referred to the Mowgli programme by the Queen Rania Centre for Entrepreneurship in Amman. Jordan is a country where unemployment and poverty are



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF DAVID PETIE



particularly acute and, like other countries, is suffering during the global economic downturn. Jordanians also have a one in 10 chance of suffering from diabetes.

Stuart Jones was the third OUBS MBA graduate. He said: "Having never visited the Middle East I jumped at the opportunity. I completed an OUBS MBA a few years ago and it has helped me build and sell multi-million pound businesses and become a consultant. What struck me immediately was the keenness and openness of the Jordanians – not a trace of the arrogance of some western entrepreneurs – followed quickly by a sense of privilege to be involved with them. What the OUBS MBA has taught me is to listen. All I have to do is continue to listen."

As the sun set behind the Dana Mountains the mentors and mentees had reached the start of their own personal journeys. New relationships had been forged, friendships created and common ground discovered, hopefully contributing to the individual successes of the Jordanian entrepreneurs. We set off back to the lodge for dinner, using torches to see through the dark, each aware that we were involved in something profound. **BM**

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

<http://www.mowgli.org.uk>