

MASHAV IN MYANMAR

Visiting representatives discuss Israel's outreach on agriculture, healthcare and disaster preparedness

Tara Lee

Two Israeli delegates recently visited Myanmar to conduct preliminary meetings with Myanmar's ministries, parliamentarians and other relevant stakeholders such as NGOs for bilateral cooperation to help build Myanmar's human resource and development capacity.

The cooperation is being coordinated by Israel's Agency for International Development (MASHAV in Hebrew acronym) and Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"One of the focuses of our discussion was to try and understand from their point of view. This is a co-owned project. We are not here to impose or pass judgment and say, 'you need to focus on this and should not focus on that,'" clarified Gil Haskel, Deputy Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and head of MASHAV in an interview with Mizzima last month.

Ambassador Mark Sofer, Deputy Director General and Head of Asia and the Pacific Division of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, concurred. "We are trying to set up a mechanism to work out what is the best way that we can move forward and prioritize in which way we can be of best assistance," he said.

Long history of relations

The two Israeli delegates were visiting at an important juncture as Myanmar's new government gets into stride.

Israel and Myanmar have a long history of friendship. The nations' relations began upon both countries' achievement of independence

from the British Empire in 1948. Myanmar, known as Burma at the time, was one of the first countries to recognize Israel and establish diplomatic relations with the nation. Premiers of both sides U Nu and David Ben-Gurion made state visits to each other's countries in the 1950s.

"For Israelis of my generation, U Nu is a household name. He was someone to look up to," said Mr Sofer, adding he and his colleague had met with U Nu's daughter at one of the meetings held during their visit to Nay Pyi Taw.

MASHAV has been extending foreign aid and educational programmes in developing countries by sending experts since the mid-20th century.

"We have lots of demands throughout the world from Africa, Latin America, India. However, Israel partakes in the project with Myanmar solely based on their seven decades of friendship to help Myanmar as it goes through its critical political juncture," said Mr Sofer.

"Israel has made a strategic decision to place Myanmar at the pinnacle of where we should be going now in Asia. We will not be asking for anything in return - not profit, business, or political advancement - just how we can be of assistance and how to work together as it looks to its future in its development."

Agriculture a core focus

Most prominent point of cooperation proposed concerns agriculture and its dovetailing industries such as water management, irrigation, and holistic oversight over production,



Mr Sofer noted.

"Israel is a leader of the world in many issues of agriculture and water, because we are a desert country and yet we manage to use the little bit of water to grow all of our food."

Israel's agriculture is characterized by its high level of technology that enables it to meet most of its food requirements through domestic production with 5 million metric tons of field crops, 1.2 billion litres of milk and 1.6 billion eggs, harvested in total area of arable land of 380,000 hectares annually, according to a recent national report.

Myanmar's poor backbone

For Myanmar, agriculture is the backbone of its economy, where 61 percent of its labour force contributes 23 percent of GDP. The principal crop is rice, which covers about two-thirds of the total area under cultivation, as well as beans, pulses and oilseeds. Cultivation takes place on only about 12.4 million



Gil Haskel, Deputy Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and head of MASHAV, left, sitting with the Israeli Ambassador Daniel Zohar Zonshine.
Photo: Tara Lee/Mizzima. Below, a vegetable farm in Israel



hectares, or 18 percent of Myanmar's total land area of about 68 million hectares. Productivity remains low in comparison with its neighbours, with per capita farm earnings that average US\$200 per year. In comparison, Thailand brings in US\$706 and Cambodia US\$434.

Low productivity can be attributed to several physical and policy constraints. Rural infrastructure deficiencies limit access to markets, storage and post-harvest facilities. Inadequate irrigation coupled with unreliable electrification leads to higher operational cost and little incentive for farmers to invest in increased food crop production.

Policy-wise, the government places a high priority on the agriculture sector, but until the recent approval of the revised land laws, all land was state-owned, which meant there was little motive to invest in improving the land and this hindered farmers from having collateral for securing loans to meet production costs. Taxation on exports and directed planting where farmers are only required to meet fixed production targets reduced the overall agricultural output.

Problems of malnutrition

Low and inconsistent output has precipitated food insecurity and overall poverty. Roughly one-fourth of rural households borrow at some point during the year to purchase food, according to the NGO LIFT. The shocking result is that stunting reportedly affects about one-third of children under five, due to malnourishment.

Without substantial reform and significant investment in the agricultural sector, poverty reduction and inclusive economic growth will be tough to crack.

Nonetheless, the new government has laid down the four economic policies, of which one is "sustaining agriculture development towards industrialization and all round development," according to a policy paper published by the Ministry of Industry in February of this year. Meanwhile, the national brief by the Department of Agricultural Planning pronounces its vision as "achieving per capita income and standard of living of rural populace relying on agriculture higher than the neighbouring countries and keeping abreast with developed



Ambassador Mark Sofer, Deputy Director General and Head of Asia and the Pacific Division of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Photo: Tara Lee/Mizzima

nations.”

This is an admirable but challenging target.

The brief outlines five major tasks in the First Five Year Short Term Plan, scheduled from 2011 to 2016: to emphasize production and utilization of high yielding and good quality seeds; to conduct training and education activities for farmers and extension staff; to implement research and development activities for sustainable agricultural development; to encourage transformation from conventional to mechanized agriculture, production of crops appropriated with climate and extension of irrigated area; to amend existing agricultural laws and regulations in line with current situation. Israel's existing expertise converges in many of the outlined objectives.

As the report points out, utilization of high yielding and good quality seeds is the starting point of agricultural production chain management.

“This is something Israel has vast experience in. Of any product or sector we decide to operate in, we address the entire value chain,” said Mr Haskel, “It starts with the quality of seeds, soil quality, water, and a climate smart agricultural scheme,

with the latest technology.”

Carefully managing the food chain

Effective management is a key component in the food processing industry. “Storage and all the post-harvest mechanism. And then from there transportation and locating and accessing the right market. All of these components have to be addressed in the same seriousness. If you leave out one, the entire project becomes futile,” says Mr Haskel.

Supply Chain Management (SCM) is a sophisticated industrial concept that if knowledge-transferred to Myanmar by MASHAV, could maximize customer value and increase competitive advantage in the marketplace - or, help ‘transform from conventional to mechanized agriculture.’

The production of crops appropriate with climate or crop selection is especially relevant considering Myanmar's varied topography, where vegetables, cotton, rubber and tropical fruits can be grown in the Mountainous Region, the Shan Plateau, the Central Dry Zone, the Delta Region, and Coastal Regions. For example, a water intensive crop such as cotton is not advisable for the Dry Zone of Myanmar, although

crops such as almonds might be a feasible with drip irrigation as done in Israel. A viable project for Myanmar's tropical forest reserve, one of the largest in Southeast Asia, is duplicating MASHAV's success in Ethiopia, where the cooperation led to significant strides in avocado and mango planting.

Sustainable agricultural development can be achieved through the teaching of organic farming. In rural Myanmar, the high price of fertilizers in addition to nondescript marketing of its usage by the manufacturers to uninformed farmers has had a series of negative impacts on the environment and economy.

“Another issue that was brought up was organic farming in rural areas,” said MrHaskel, “hoping it can bring an income through healthier agricultural products, which is also something we can consider.”

Managing water use

MASHAV can contribute to the extension of irrigated areas through different avenues, assured MrHaskel. “[A possibility is] the entire sphere of water. Water management, purifying water, conserving water, irrigation, smart irrigation, in the way that farmers will depend less on the



Israel is an expert at managing and preserving water. Photo: Government of Israel

climate and have more control over their agricultural products. This is something Israel will be very happy to program,” he said.

In addition to its land resource, Myanmar is abundant in water, which is underutilized; less than 20 percent of croplands are irrigated.

Israel, on the other hand, has 50 percent of the land irrigated. Of the 1,129 million cubic metres of water used by agriculture per year in Israel, some 30 percent of agricultural water is treated wastewater for drip irrigation of orchards and non-food crops, while 16 percent is saline water.

“We don’t import water. We desalinate sometimes, we create water, we save water, we preserve water, we maintain water,” Mr Sofer said, stressing the importance and complexity of water management, “You can manage without tomatoes, and you can manage without lemons, but you cannot manage without water. The industry cannot manage without water and the household cannot manage without water. It’s the most important substance in any country in the world. Even if you have a subtropical climate like Myanmar or Sri Lanka, doesn’t matter where. You will have water problems. So water is a very big issue which we would like to assist with.”

Careful management of water is necessary given the problems of climate change and resulting erratic precipitation, presenting a challenge to farms in protecting their crops and livelihoods.

“Rainfall is much less predictable than in the past. Farmers used to wait until just before the rainy season to plant the seeds. Nowadays, the rainy season can be delayed, or it does not come at all. Once you have complete dependency on climate, which is the case for most of Myanmar, it becomes very difficult to plant. You can have a very poor crop, which can result in families losing their livelihood,” said Mr Haskel.

“The second effect is scarcity in rains in areas that used to be fertile. The Dry Zone of Myanmar, 100 years ago, it was not a dry zone. So there is less rain in the dry zones, but sometimes there are more in the rainy areas. There is flooding, soil erosion. All of these things can be controlled today by technology. Once you have an agricultural sector like Israel’s which is non-dependent on climate,” Mr Haskel noted. Israel has developed their water management system to the point where the nation does not suffer from water scarcity despite its arid landscape.

“Agriculture is a big thing. It can

be everything. It can be dairy, horticulture, aquaculture, floriculture, it’s very big,” said Mr Sofer.

Other components of Myanmar’s agriculture sector is livestock and fisheries, which includes buffalo, swine, poultry, fish and shrimp. MASHAV could “improve the knowledge, know-how and the ability of fishing,” Mr Haskel said.

Additional examples include high-technology cattle wearables. For example, a monitor attached to cows can track the number of steps the animal takes daily as a means to ascertain its physical activity and hence its strength and health. According to the Israeli Dairy Board, “On the farms in Asia where Israeli ideas/systems have been implemented, cows achieved far higher production levels than before.”

Healthcare and disaster preparedness

On the table for consideration outside of agriculture are healthcare system development and emergency preparedness. “We have a very efficient and sophisticated regional healthcare system in Israel, where every single citizen in Israel has access to a perfect health care scheme. We are very happy to assist Myanmar in such a scheme here as well,”



Fruits of the harvest in Israel - Israeli producers put a lot of effort into value-added development of their farming to maximize quality and income. Photo: Israel Photo Gallery

said Mr Haskel.

Israel has had universal health coverage since the introduction of a progressively financed statutory health insurance system in 1995. A review by European Observatory attributes its efficiency to “regulated competition among the health plans, tight regulatory controls on the supply of hospital bed, accessible and professional primary care,” as well as its “sophisticated information systems that include electronic medical records and data on activity levels, services provided and quality of care.”

In contrast, Myanmar needs to scale up in terms of coverage, accessibility and quality. The government spending on healthcare is still one of the lowest in the ASEAN region with a total budget of 3.9 percent, approximately US\$ 450 million, of the government’s budget. Healthcare spending in Myanmar is primarily being paid for by out of pocket (OOP) cost by the general public. According to the World Bank’s 2012 census, OOP payments accounted for 92.7 percent of the total healthcare expenditures. Health care providers are centered on Yangon and Mandalay.

Nevertheless, a series of reforms were undertaken by the present government, major instruments of

which include National Comprehensive Development Plan (NCDP) and Framework for Economic and Social Reform (FESR). Essential goals outlined by the Ministry of Health include: to ensure the availability of quality, efficacious and low cost essential medicines, equipment and technologies; to strengthen community engagement in health service delivery and promotion; and to strengthen the evidence-based information system.

Furthermore, Israel has extensive experience in emergency management, owing to frequent conflicts and terrorist attacks in the region.

Mr Haskel said that other things they do in the world and can duplicate in Myanmar is emergency medicine, or in general emergency preparedness.

Over time, the Israeli state has developed an array of agencies to deal with emergencies, to which the Ministry of Public Security, fire and rescue services, health sector and civil sector coordinate together comprehensive response to best protect its citizens and infrastructure. “We can work with Myanmar government to improve their inter-governmental apparatus for preparing for disasters, either natural disasters or man-made disasters,” said Mr

Haskel.

Building on existing programmes

It is essential to remark in evaluating the potential of MASHAV-Myanmar cooperation that Israeli programmes has already been operating in Myanmar. For instance, about 300 Myanmar students undertake on-the-job agricultural training in Israel for 11 months, according to the delegates. For a part of the programme the students study advanced agricultural studies and for the other half they are delegated to farms and for hands-on practice, for which they receive enough salary to save up to US\$10,000 - enough in Myanmar to open a small farm or a business.

Incidentally, MASHAV signed last month a cooperation agreement with the Mekong Institute, headquartered in northern Thailand. Trainees gathered from larger Mekong region - Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Southern China - will receive training on entrepreneurship and innovation. In consideration of the previous and ongoing projects and its success, Mr Sofer said, “We know Myanmar. It’s not like we are coming out from the wilderness. In that respect, the right road is what we have to look at.”

Mr Sofer further emphasized the importance of having a defined course in their cooperation. "We need to be very focused, because otherwise we will do something which is not on the list of priorities of what Myanmar wants ... We will work together and set up a system where we will be able to identify together what is the priority. If we did everything, we will fail."

Building human resources

All projects and programmes will be capacity-building initiatives geared towards human resource development.

As Mr Haskel said: "Human resources development is the most sustainable method of development. Once you implant the knowledge within a professional, it stays there. Any other method, to our experience, funding, handing out donations, or donating equipment, can be abused. Due to corruption, through inefficiency, through mismanagement and malfunction. Once you invest in the human mind, then sustainability is assured."

Added benefit of human resource development projects undertaken by MASHAV is its assurance against corruption, said Mr Haskel. "We have trained to date more than a quarter of a million trainees from more than 140 countries, half of them in Israel and the other half on the field. We don't give out funds. But we do the training ourselves."

Trainers and consultants are dispatched and remunerated directly by MASHAV. "The way MASHAV works, there is no room for corruption. It's basically a corruption-free mechanism," said Mr Haskel.

In addition to transparency, MASHAV aims to safeguard the efficacy of a project. The monitoring and evaluation team of MASHAV follows the crafting of the training programmes through the various stages to see that what the project is doing is more or less in tune with what was planned. They gauge the effectiveness of what we are doing through interviews, through analysis of the effect on the environment, both physical and human, according to Mr Haskel.

Briefly discussed during the delegates visit was the broader issue of Israel-Myanmar trade relations and enhancing Israeli investment in Myanmar. "There is very little Israel investment in Myanmar. And it's not enough. We need to make it bigger. The way to make it bigger is to expose what Myanmar has to offer to the Israeli industry."

Israeli business has considerable presence all over Southeast Asia, such as in Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, Singapore, but scarcely in Myanmar due to Israelis' lack of familiarity with the country. In order to "open doors for the business community," Israel plans to send over a delegation of Israeli businessmen who can survey the economic landscape, Mr Sofer said.

Mr Sofer was upbeat on the results of their visit. "I think it was very successful. The government is really in transition now. Everything is in a dynamic mode. Together we will identify what is our relative niche."

Thereafter, "Israel will place many resources in the hands of Myanmar," he said.



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