

Creating opportunity through entrepreneurship for women and youth in Upper Egypt

by Andrew Thompson

Fostering social change and bringing in new ideas can be enormously beneficial to a community, but it can also meet with a degree of local resistance. How best to engage with that opposition is an interesting question, illustrated in part by the story of the Social Enterprise Development Accelerator (SEDA) project in the Assiut governorate of Upper Egypt.

Supported by the British Council DICE Fund, the project aimed to create a favourable, sustainable, and gender balanced eco-system for social enterprise. It was developed and managed by two organisations, [Positive Planet International](#) (PPI) and [Asfar](#), working with intermediary organisations to help create a more supportive environment. Ultimately the aim is to encourage more women and young people to run social and creative businesses.

Assiut is deeply traditional. It takes six hours to get there driving south from Cairo. Straddling the Nile, it has a population of over 4.5m. Most of the inhabitants are Sunni Muslim or Coptic Christian. It is one of the poorest areas of Egypt. Most of the community works in agriculture, tourism, and light industry, but there are very few jobs and very high unemployment. Local community organisations have limited resources and limited connections with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The more isolated the villages are, the less access they have to quality education and employment.

Under the terms of the project, PPI delivered a series of workshops and training sessions designed to raise awareness of social and creative enterprises and the opportunities they can offer for women and youth. UK-based Asfar organised exchange visits and information sharing to showcase the workings of UK-based social entrepreneurs.

Enas Abdul-Aziz of PPI explains that the two organisations were seeking to persuade local communities that women and youth can run their own businesses. “What we found to our surprise was that men and the community in general are happy with women working in traditional sectors, such as textiles, teaching, or selling home-made food, but when it comes to innovation or certain other activities, that’s where the problem arises,” she says. Also surprising was that older men, traditional community leaders, turned out to be quite open minded about women becoming business leaders.

Instead, the strongest opposition came from younger men who were worried about competition for jobs. Some households can have up to five unemployed men – including the sons, the father, even the grandfather. So they tend to reject an approach which is based on encouraging the mother or the daughters to set up their own business – in their view the women should stay at home and the first priority of the family should be to find work for its male members.



Enas says PPI has developed various strategies to engage with communities and respond to this issue. First it has stressed that the aim is to encourage both women and youth, including of course young men, to consider becoming social entrepreneurs. As she puts it, “we are not here to empower one gender at the expense of another”.



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Second, care was taken to involve local people in the social entrepreneurship training and the exchange trip to London. This meant that the people explaining the potential benefits of social entrepreneurship and gender balance spoke in local accents and were part of the rural community, not unfamiliar faces parachuted in from Cairo.

Third, the project worked not only with community members but also with the leadership of local NGOs, the managers and chief executives who may in the future be called on to support women and youth-led enterprises. This included one-to-one discussion sessions to underline the benefits of female and youth entrepreneurship.

A further level of difficulty is that the concept of social and creative enterprises is little understood in Egypt. The law recognises for-profit entities, such as limited companies, and not for profit ones, such as NGOs. The idea of small enterprises that may cut across that divide is still unfamiliar. Although for-profits can also have social objectives, for the moment NGOs cannot become involved in commercial activities.

While it will take time for the legal framework to change, Enas is optimistic, pointing out that some people are already running social and creative enterprises, almost without knowing that is what they are actually doing. She gave as an example the story of a woman who collects waste and discarded ceramics along the banks of the Nile to recycle into bright coloured earthenware plates and dishes using



vegetable dyes. Her enterprise helps earn her a livelihood but also has a positive social and environmental impact.

Sheniz Tan of Asfar adds that the collaboration with DICE has also brought some unexpected benefits to her London-based organisation, which describes itself as a venture philanthropy investor, focused on promoting good grassroots ideas in poor communities in the Arab World. Contact with DICE had allowed Asfar to make useful collaborative links with an organisation in Brazil, as well as bringing it into contact with UK-based social consultancy Red Ochre, itself involved in DICE projects in Egypt and Indonesia. Asfar is active in countries like Georgia, Morocco and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and had begun discussing with Red Ochre whether the “DICE model” of collaborative partnerships might be applied somewhere else.

