

Youth-led NGOs in Egypt: Challenges and Aspirations

Kazem Hemeida

March 18, 2012

kazem.hemeida@gmail.com

It is wise to examine the situation of youth NGOs¹ in a country that witnesses a revolution ignited by youth. A country that youth (10-29) represent 40% of its population², is supposed to move forward with the fuel of the innovation, energy and dreams of its youth. Indeed, youth-led NGOs should be supported and in various ways; first, they should not only be included in the policy implementation stage, but also in policy making. Second, formal as well as informal youth groups need to operate in a more supportive legal environment, with less restrictions, and better partnership with various stakeholders, including the government and local funding institutions. Third, youth NGOs should be looked at as major opportunity for youth mobilization, due to their ability to mobilize individuals towards opportunities for self-development and community development. Fourth, they should be active players in the formulation of the new Egypt, for example through active participation in national development projects. In this regard, umbrella institutions such as the Egyptian Youth Federation³ can play a key role. Fifth, the level organizational effectiveness of youth NGOs should be leveraged, especially in the field of volunteer management, financial sustainability, strategic planning, campaigning and advocacy, lobbying, and managing stakeholders.”

This paper will examine the situation of youth-led NGOs in the contexts of pre-revolution, and their contribution to the youth-led uprising, which was turned into a revolution that toppled the head of a totalitarian regime. It will also highlight the status quo in terms of the current challenges they face in relationship to major actors such as, the state, other NGOs, funding institutions and young people. A considerable part of the paper is based on interviews conducted to young people from youth-led NGOs.

¹ Throughout the paper, the words “Youth NGOs” and “Youth-led NGOs” will be used interchangeably, referring to NGOs that are mainly led by youth below 35, and/or those organizations that involve youth in their management structure, whose programs are directed to youth

² Egypt census 2006

³ The Egyptian Youth Federation is a registered umbrella NGO that supports youth NGOs from all over Egypt, through provision of tailored capacity development training, networking opportunities, and promotion for youth policies

Pre-revolution youth-led development

The number of youth NGOs and student clubs have been on the increase over the past 10 years. One of the factors that led to the increase of student activities is the ghost of potential unemployment. Students realized that the current educational system does not fully equip them for the requirements of the labor market; therefore, they decided to create alternative learning platforms where they can update their knowledge, gain practical experience and soft skills which can hardly be learned inside the classroom of public universities. Also, the increase of youth-led NGOs has been influenced by the support of international organizations, although the impact of such support was relatively small on the ground.

The legal framework was restrictive for the work of youth-led NGOs. And here the word “legal” refers to both the formal legislation as well as the informal interference in the work of NGOs, practiced by law enforcement institutions. NGOs in general used to face impediments conducting activities outside the scope they have written in their statutes, and amending the statute would consume a long period of time that may result in missing opportunities, or prevent the organization from responding to an urgent community need. Ahmed Gamal, a 32-year-old community activist, who is a Board Member of a youth-led NGO called Development no Borders (DnB), stated that his organization has avoided implementing certain activities in the past to avoid “disapproval from the government.” Development no Borders relies heavily on volunteers to implement skills development programs and organize seminars and conferences about culture and civic engagement for youth. Gamal points out that “we receive no support and no appreciation from the government at all, their (the government) role is just to audit us.”

Another important manifestation of the restrictions that used to be enforced by the government, represented in the Ministry of Social Solidarity (now called Ministry of Social Affairs), or represented in the State Security apparatus (now called National Security) is that every activity implemented by an NGO should be approved by the Ministry, which in turn, approves it from the State Security. This approval process is more complicated in cases where the project being approved is funded by a foreign donor. Nesrine Abdel Hameed, a 30-year-old Financial Officer works at Dreamers of Tomorrow youth-led NGO, reported that her organization has been struggling with fulfilling the reporting requirements of the Ministry and “it has been over a year waiting for Ministry approvals for pending projects funded by international organizations.”

It is important to imagine how these obstacles impeded the focus of many youth NGOs, and diverted the consumption of their resources towards paperwork and pursuit of “safe” activities away from critical fields such as human rights education or political awareness.

Donors played a key role in the survival of youth-led NGOs. A quick mapping of the donor environment would reveal the presence of different types of donors with relative influences on the work of NGOs. First, the international NGOs funding coming from institutions such as the UN, which is important because it usually covers large and long-term projects, but unfortunately, this funding is not accessible by smaller NGOs. Also, international NGOs assume their grantees to have high capacity of internal management, which many NGOs lack. Second, the private sector funding, mainly through Corporate Social Responsibility programs, is a more accessible funding that mainly requires a good record of achievements to be demonstrated by the NGOs seeking the funding. Third, international aid agency (mostly affiliated with governments); a funding that can support the operation of NGOs for a relatively long period of time and requires the grantee NGO to have strong organizational capacity. Fourth, individual philanthropists also play a role as they are owners of businesses, and members of wealthy families, who usually tend to fund charity-based activities such as distribution of food and construction of medical clinics.

Even though the role that funding institutions play is vital, sometimes their visions are not aligned with the visions of fund recipients. Yousra Mounir, a 27-year-old, who works as an Awareness Coordinator at the award winning youth-led NGO Alashanyk ya Balady, indicates that in some instances, her organization may seek funding for a project she does not believe responds to the priorities of the community. “We go to very poor communities and teach people healthy diet and the importance of eating fruits!” she added.

Other important actors in the environment of youth NGOs are youths themselves, because youth are the leaders and beneficiaries of these organizations. Although young people do represent the big proportion of the population, youth NGOs had challenges recruiting volunteers. This is due to the lack of awareness about civic engagement and volunteerism amongst youth, the academic obligations consumes the bulk of the students’ time, and the type of jobs that many young people hold at this age involve extended work hours and work on weekends. Examples of these jobs are customer service representative at call centers, and sales representatives.

Furthermore, in general, youth tend to volunteer in activities that are charity-oriented rather than development-oriented. One example is the giant Resala charity organization, which is supported by 100,000 volunteers from all over Egypt. Resala have 20 different programs directed to beneficiaries such as the orphans, the blind and deaf, illiteracy alleviation, and blood donation. Mohamed Omar, a 21-year old volunteer at Resala, who has been heading the Media Committee of the one of the charity convoys in Cairo, describes the reasons why he had volunteered in Resala: “It was during the holy month of Ramadan (a month when Muslims fast and seek to increase their charity activities) when I knocked Resala’s door and I told them I want to work with you.”

Partnership between youth NGOs can leverage both resources and the impact on community. However, in many instances, some NGOs tend to work in isolation from other potential partners either because they want to utilize the whole funding, or because they want to protect their ideas so that no other NGO would “steal” it, or because they cannot identify the right partners to work with and manage win-win relationships with those partners. Abdel Hameed reports that her former manager would tend to minimize involving other NGOs in the work that her organization does. She adds that her manager usually considered other NGOs as competitors, not potential collaborators.

In this regard, some positive efforts should be highlighted, such as the case of the Egyptian Youth Federation. The federation works to assess the capacity development needs of its member NGOs, and provide tailored training to facilitate partnerships. Moreover, it seeks to obtain grants covering large projects that would involve more than one implementing member organization. For example, with a grant of Microsoft Corporation, the federation succeeded to train 5000 young people from all over Egypt on ICT skills. This output was resulted from the collaboration of 4 member NGOs from 3 governorates for a period of 2 years. Without this coordinating role, the chance for any individual organization to access that opportunity from Microsoft would have been very weak.

In addition, the federation organizes tours of awareness sessions that invites youth NGOs from all over the country under one roof to learn about the work of each other and identify potential areas of cooperation. In the past year, the federation held these networking meetings for 100 youth NGOs in 5 governorates, aiming to establish a platform for networking and raising awareness about the services provided by the federation.

The contribution of Youth NGOs to the Egyptian revolution

Independent youth-led NGOs, youth informal groups, and student clubs played a critical role in raising awareness about civic rights, preparing responsible young leaders, and providing spaces for youth to gather and discuss the problems that the country faces and possible solutions. Despite the fact that political participation was forbidden for youth NGOs, members of NGOs took part in the wave of political mobilization that started at least 4 years ago, in the occasion of the 4th of April uprising for the right of the textile workers. Gamal reports that many members of his organization have supported reform initiatives such as the National Association for Change, which was created by the former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Muhammad El Baradei, to demand political reform in 2010. Gamal points out that he participated in the peaceful marches along with his fellow members of his NGO as individuals, not representing DnB.

Furthermore, youth NGOs has been influencing the thinking styles of youth by providing non-formal education projects that encourage critical thinking, problem solving, leadership and teamwork. An example is the Youth Development Center at DnB. "The center is responsible for giving training courses related to human resources, management, soft skills and ICT skills." Gamal added. He also highlighted that a common comment that comes from DnB beneficiaries is that the "training has changed the way they think."

Youth NGOs has also created cross-cultural learning experiences, which has contributed to the alleviation of xenophobia, promotion of tolerance and exchange of experiences. Over the past 3 years, DnB has sent 100 young Egyptians to different parts of the world, to attend various cultural exchange activities that aim to strengthen the international experiences and promote citizenship amongst Egyptian youth. This had a positive effect on youth endeavors, in terms of employing best practices learned across borders, and linking both local and international development agendas together. This has contributed positively to the strong and peaceful youth who risked their lives to bring about a change that Egyptians deserve.

The current challenges and aspirations of Egyptian youth-led NGOs

Now, more than one year has passed since the start of the revolution and youth NGOs have been experiencing rapid environmental changes. Some of these changes were positive whereas some others were negative. Above all that, there are some compelling and legitimate aspirations that define the role youth-led NGOs should be playing in revolutionary Egypt.

Amongst the positive changes brought by the revolution is that more youth are willing to volunteers and engage in building the new Egypt. A huge bomb of energy was exploded right after Hosni Mubarak had stepped down. Some youth groups organized themselves online and met to clean up the streets, paint the curbs, or distribute flyers promoting citizen responsibility. Similarly, NGOs were able to recruit more volunteers than before. Gamal state it this way: "after Mubarak stepped down, the number of volunteers coming to our NGO has increased. Many volunteers come to engage in political awareness activities, hoping for a better future."

Amongst the negative developments emerged recently is that access to funding has become harder for many NGOs. Funding that comes from international organizations has become a burden, due to the prolonged investigation that the government enforces. Some mainstream media outlets have been portraying recipients of international funding as adopters of foreign agendas that can affect the stability and sovereignty of the country. This mental image was enhanced after the incident when 17 offices of 10 NGOs operating in Egypt were investigated as part of judicial actions taken against what the government called "unregistered NGOs." Among these organizations are American NGOs, which led to some tensions between the US and Egypt.

The issue of foreign funding raises concerns about the future of youth NGOs. In other words, what developments to expect in term of governmental control over foreign funding? Can NGOs survive without foreign funding? If yes, the sustainable alternative is to create a national source of funding; for example a large trust fund that supports the programs run by youth NGOs and contribute to their sustainability. What are the possibilities that an umbrella organization such as the Egyptian Youth Federation can be supported, and equipped with the tools that enable it to manage this large trust fund, with full transparency and accountability to all stakeholders?

Furthermore, youth NGOs need to develop a better relationship with the different government institutions. In order for that to happen, ongoing dialogue should be established to build trust, identify common objectives, and formulate joint action plans. Youth NGOs need to reserve a permanent seat at the decision making table. And they should be dealt with as partners for the development of the country, not entities to be audited. Gamal points out his vision for youth NGOs in Egypt: "Youth-led NGOs should contribute to the economic development of Egypt. They can take part in national projects that can transform the country. They can raise awareness so that Egyptian people can better choose the right politicians. They can transfer their innovation and know-how to formal institutions. But in order for that to occur, a political vision and will should exist." Moreover, as a call of urgency, youth NGOs should participate in the constitutional drafting that will occur very soon, and in the making of the law governing NGOs, and in the formulation of the national youth policy to be implemented under the government to be elected soon. To do that, they should be able to lead advocacy campaigns, lobby, and manage a variety of stakeholders including the new political actors that emerged with the revolution.