

Collaborative Communities in Egypt: How unconventional networking supports social enterprises to scale

by David Harrold

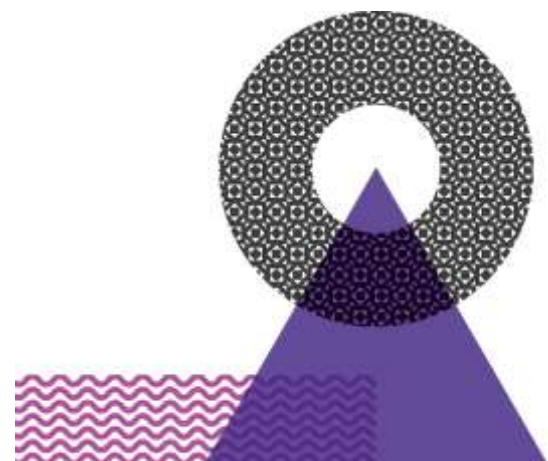
In almost any profession, and in almost all sectors, networking is one of the most crucial components in building a successful career or business. For all its importance, however, networking is an area in which many of us struggle. Although we live in hyper “connected” times, with busy schedules and even busier inboxes it can be hard to find time and places to make and foster genuine personal connections. When opportunities to do so arise at conventional events like conferences and trade shows, they typically come all at once, or in superhumanly quick succession. In these circumstances it can be difficult to establish

meaningful connections; even substantive conversations can be hard to place, reduced to one of many business cards gathered that day.

Dalia Said is someone who has grappled with the question of how to foster powerful professional connections more than most. In order to fill what she perceived as a void in the networking events space in her native Egypt, she co-founded [El Rehla](#). Literally ‘the journey’ in Arabic, El Rehla specialises in coordinating immersive, multi-day networking retreats which take place outside of the city, free from the distractions and disturbances of daily life. Their goal is to facilitate strong personal connections which are built to last. ‘We’re trying to create more collaborative communities’, Dalia says, ‘if you travel with a group of people, the level of connection you make is much deeper than a conference you might attend in the city’.

In a project enabled by the British Council’s DICE Fund, El Rehla applied their model of unconventional networking in an effort to accelerate the growth of Egypt’s growing social enterprise scene. ‘Social enterprise has really kicked off in Egypt since the Arab Spring... but enterprises don’t always have access to the support they need to scale up and become more successful’ says Nadia Laabs from the UK based [Impact Collective](#), El Rehla’s partner in the project. As they saw it, the issue was a lack of a culture around impact investment, the name for investments that are made to generate social and environmental as well as financial returns. As a relatively new concept to Egypt, it is neither widely practised nor understood. The Impact Collective and El Rehla identified low awareness of impact investment models among Egyptian investors. Similarly, they saw that many social entrepreneurs, despite running impact focused enterprises, lacked the ability to assess and measure that impact. Because of that they were less likely to attract impact investment.

To change this, they set out with the ambitious goal of instigating a ‘nationwide initiative of impact investment’, led by networking amongst educators, social entrepreneurs and investors. ‘It’s about bringing it more into public awareness, so we don’t have investment going into strictly for-profit businesses’, Nadia explains. To achieve their goal, the partnership set out to take a holistic approach, focusing on four distinct groups who would be key to developing the culture of impact investment: social entrepreneurs, educators and mentors, investors, and private sector representatives.



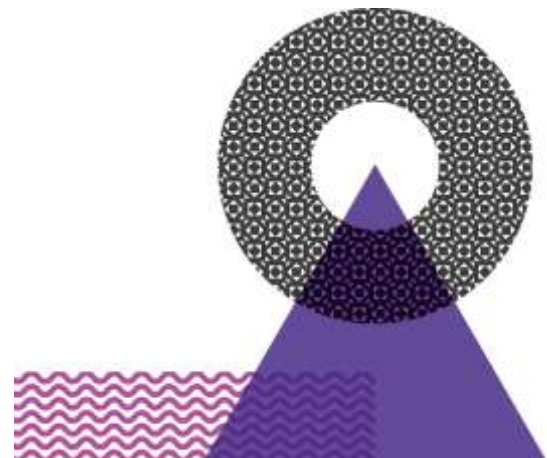
The joint project consisted of a series of networking events and workshops to drive understanding and connectivity within and between these groups.



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The initiative kicked off in April 2019, with one of El Rehla's immersive retreats. Over 50 entrepreneurs were brought together to share their stories, connect with one another and 'take a deep dive into impact and meaningful work on the ground'. Nadia attended the four-day retreat as one of Impact Collective's specialists, she recalls that 'we knew we were going into something special, but seeing it was just something else. It's hard to put into words how people opened up during the retreat... some people had a whole new outlook on handling their business and what they could do'.

Another key focus of the collaboration was to develop the inclusivity of Egypt's social enterprise community, which is disproportionately concentrated in the North of the country - principally around the cities of Cairo and Alexandria. Upper Egypt, the sparsely populated region to the south, lags behind in terms of social enterprise and economic development more generally. As such, the region's social entrepreneurs made



up a large number of the retreats' attendees, to promote cohesion throughout the country, and ensure Upper Egypt would not be left behind in their drive to a more established culture of impact management.

After the retreat, El Rehla and Impact Collective ran a series of technical workshops, focusing on the other target 'elements of the ecosystem' that supports social enterprises. There was a 'training the trainers' workshop, designed to 'develop the capabilities of educators in assessing impact, so we have more equipped leaders in the market', Dalia says. It is hoped that by equipping social entrepreneurs, the ideas and techniques around impact will continue to disseminate long after the conclusion of the one-year project. The sessions catered to corporate representatives and other stakeholders in the private sector, encouraging a greater awareness of social enterprise, and explaining how their organisations could take more action to support its growth. A final session was held in December for investors, aiming to 'spark conversations' and increase awareness of impact investment models within this crucial community.

While it may be a little early to tell whether the project succeeded in their goal of precipitating 'a nationwide initiative of impact investment', both Nadia and Dalia speak confidently of the nascent social enterprise scene in Egypt. 'It's a space that's still developing. It's a journey for this ecosystem' says Nadia, 'but it's been amazing to see how organisations are collaborating and being innovative to really get ahead'.

