

From the bazaar to Birmingham: a partnership opens global markets for Egyptian artisans

by Andrew Thompson

A lot of social enterprises start out small, with a basic idea that gets developed, refined and adapted over time. Hisham El Gazzar knows a lot about that. He has been on a 17 year-plus journey, developing [Yadawee](#), a company whose mission is to promote and export high quality Egyptian handicrafts, for the benefit of local artisans.

Hisham says he went to a French school and also learnt English. He studied communications and gained experience in advertising and marketing. In 2002, still in the relatively early days of the internet, he had his idea. "I thought maybe I could create a website, put a lot of Egyptian handicrafts up on display, and, using my background in marketing and the languages I have, maybe I would be able to export these products. I thought this was going to be easy. I didn't have any experience of the handcraft sector at all."



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He had to learn a lot. He started out by visiting Khan el-Khalili, the centuries-old sprawling bazaar in old Cairo, well known by many international tourists. There he simply bought products he felt might work for an export market, haggling with the merchants to try and get a good price. He started out exporting small boxes of craft goods to the United States, such as shishas, the glass water pipes that are used to smoke aromatic tobacco in bars and coffee houses. But it didn't go smoothly. "I started facing problems of quality, of a lack of consistency in the quality, of problems with prices, and so-on. I knew from the beginning



that this was not sustainable". A change of tack was needed. Hisham spent four years working for CIDA, the Canadian International Development Agency setting up an export hub in Upper Egypt. This gave him direct contact with local artisans and got him involved in buying yarns, dyeing fabrics and making suggestions on design and packaging.

Working as a consultant for various international agencies Hisham became aware of some of the advantages – and restrictions – of their business model. He laughs, saying that at the time putting the words “private sector” in the same sentence as “development project” was taboo. The fear was that dealing with the private sector might involve corruption. Not-for-profit NGOs were favoured, but they were funded only for one-off projects for relatively short periods. When the money ran out, the projects stopped dead – that too was unsustainable. Hisham’s thought now is that “there is nothing wrong with using the for-profit private sector to empower business, as long as it is ethical, and applies fair trade principles” (Yadawee, set up by Hisham and co-founder Tarek Sheta, is in the process of registering with the World Fair Trade Organisation – WFTO).

Hisham and Shenouda Bissada can’t remember exactly how they met but they successfully applied to the British Council DICE Fund in 2018. Shenouda works for [Alfanar](#), a London-based venture philanthropy organisation founded by the late Tarek Ben Halim, a Libyan-born investment banker. Alfanar’s vision, Shenouda says, is to “bring the essence of private business into the social world.” The idea is that it provides seed funding, technical support, mentorship, assistance in marketing, help computerising the financial accounts, and any other support needed to increase the effectiveness of the social enterprise, with a specific focus on income generation. Its founder was always interested in handcrafts, believing only a few adjustments in quality and packaging would make them commercially viable and competitive in European export markets.

The joint project is designed to connect Egyptian artisans with worldwide consumers. Hisham had noticed that development funds tend to support communities in Upper Egypt rather unequally. So he targeted production “clusters” in otherwise overlooked areas. They include the towns of Akhmin (famous for large hand looms) Nequada (well known for scarf production), Fowa (which produces kilim rugs) and Dahla (an oasis in the western desert which makes basketry). The fifth “cluster” is a refugee community in Maadi, an area of Cairo on the eastern bank of the Nile. This is designed to function as a “value added” or finishing off operation, in charge of additional sewing, printing and embroidery on products from the other clusters.

As part of the project each cluster received skills and management training. This included technical training in the craft skills necessary to make the products, but also capacity building, new product development, how to run social media campaigns, and how to prepare catalogues and photo-shoots. Training for an initial group of 30 basket weavers in Dahla was so successful that it was expanded to take another 30. At the marketing end British Council funding also helped Yadawee participate in trade fairs – one in Egypt and one in Birmingham in the UK.

Hisham acknowledges that not everything went well: the project has had to be flexible, stopping some activities because the intended beneficiaries were not ready for them, or didn’t see the benefit. He also notes the delicate task of trying to balance changing international fashions and consumer trends with traditional crafting. “You know, these people have been doing these crafts for ages. They have learned from their parents and grandparents. They have been in this kind of comfort zone – although it is not too



comfortable because of low incomes – but they have been set in their ways and if you come to them with new ideas the resistance is very high,” he says. One sign of the attempt to balance these requirements is a change in language. Hisham now talks both about handicrafts – the more traditional ethnic products, and about more contemporary items that come under the general headings of “home décor” and “home textiles”.

At the end of the day, both Hisham and Shenouda says the project has helped move their beneficiaries closer to sustainable livelihoods. Shenouda is confident that the project will push export sales, although maintaining an ongoing presence at trade fairs may be difficult to finance. Hisham says success can be measured across three indicators: achieving what was promised; delivering real benefits to the “clusters”; and achieving sustainability.

