

## Real lives, Real money and Real change: young people create their own future from Northern Ireland to Upper Egypt

by Andrew Thompson



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Different social enterprises, charities and NGOs develop their own ways of working, backed by theories of how things change in the world. One model of change has been developed by [Youth Bank International](#) (YBI). This organisation traces its roots back to Northern Ireland in the 1990s when the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland hosted one of the first YouthBanks. The idea was then developed in the Republic of Ireland in the 2000s, leading to the creation of YBI, a charity with a global vision in 2014. YBI is now present in 25 countries around the world. Helena Habidja of YBI says its vision is of “a world where young people lead change and make differences in their communities”. The aim is to empower young people to create their own future, using an approach described as involving “Real Lives, Real Money, and Real Change”.

Helena explains, “we focus on people aged roughly 14 to 25, get them to research the problems that matter to them, and to raise money and make small seed grants to other young people who are involved in managing projects that will help solve the problems.” The money can be obtained through fundraising, “participatory budgeting” (through partner organisations) or through social entrepreneurship. It is important that all the decisions should be in young peoples’ hands, and that in the process they should be helped to develop “soft” or life skills, including critical and business thinking.



YBI had collaborated with the [Waqfeyat Al-Maadi](#) (WMCF) foundation on various youth projects in 2014. Manar Kamel, who works for WMCF, explains that it was set up in 2007 to offer vocational training, youth empowerment, and environmental awareness in a range of poor urban communities dotted across southern Cairo. Like YBI it shares an interest in moving from purely charitable activities to those that are more focused on sustainable enterprise and development. It places particular emphasis on working with what it calls community-based organisations (CBOs). Together with these CBOs it has promoted a wide range of activities, including roof-top gardening, waste recycling, and artistic and cultural festivals.

With this track record of collaborative work, both organisations successfully applied for support from the British Council DICE Fund. The one-year project was designed to strengthen five CBOs in shanty towns in Southern Cairo so that they could become sustainable hubs for YouthBanks, focused on supporting income-generating entrepreneurial projects by young people, and particularly by young women. It was also intended that through the overall project, participants would gain access to a wider national and international network, solve problems in their communities and design solutions to build and sustain their own funding.

Working together the two organisations ran a “training the trainers” course for CBOs and engaged with young people seeking to initiate a range of projects in child and adult education, the arts, recycling, and vocational training. Helena gives an example of a project to recycle clothing. She says “We went from defining the problem, finding ideas, offering learning about using different business tools, using primary and secondary research, explaining how to talk with your customers, and adding marketing. Waqfeyat was also doing different projects and mentoring work with them, so they had not only the support available from learning basic business tools but on top of this some of the additional things that they needed. A lot of the project proponents came only with the idea, they needed a lot of other things to structure what it was going to look like in practice, where they should start. We talked about starting small, and then scaling up in the right way.”

The participants were really focused on planning the next steps. They also got the support of mentors specifically chosen for the needs of each venture. Manar points out that this process of business skills training sometime refines or changes the original idea. In fact, it led to a pivot in the clothes recycling project, which changed its focus to become more of a fashion design project using recycled materials.

Around 70-80% of the beneficiaries were, as was intended, young women. This could have posed some issues given the socially conservative outlook in local communities, where some believe young women should not travel far outside the home for work activities. But Manar explains that the communities valued the income generation created by the projects and the young women involved often chose activities that were home-based, or close-to-home based. There were also some legal and administrative issues to surmount. Egyptian law recognises for-profit and not-for-profit organisations – limited companies and NGOs. But the concept of social and creative enterprises that seek both to earn commercial revenues and have a positive social impact doesn’t fit comfortably within current regulations. In practice, what this meant was that the first six months of a 12-month project had to be spent seeking official approval for it to go ahead. The project itself then had to be squeezed into the second six months – a tough scheduling and organisational challenge.

Both YBI and WMCF say they are proud and pleased with what they have achieved, against much tighter deadlines than expected. Helena said one of the best moments was seeing



young women speaking in public for the first time in their lives, explaining their proposals in a confident and positive manner. “By changing people, we will change communities” she says, adding “this is what happened: every single individual who was there experienced change. There was a ‘can do’ attitude. Of course, developing the business skills and knowledge was important, but it is also about how people feel about themselves, about their self-esteem to see it through and meet the challenges ahead, and about building networks of peer-to-peer support.”

