



Stories from the community philanthropy field Number 2

‘Nothing really made it easy except that things got complicated’

The story of the Waqfeyat al Maadi Community Foundation

The GFCF interviewed Marwa al-Daly, founder of the Waqfeyat al Maadi Community Foundation (WMCF), about the circumstances surrounding the Foundation’s establishment, and how these have been re-shaped by the events of the Arab Spring.

Those of us outside the Middle East and North Africa have watched the Arab Spring unfurl with a mixture of awe and anxiety. Can change to such rigid structures come about without huge loss of life? What kind of societies will emerge from this political turmoil? And, if people can gather together to achieve this kind of result, is there anything they couldn’t do if they put their minds to it?

For those living through these events from inside the countries, the experience must be very different – all the more so if you are a fledgling community foundation, established with a precise mission to provide sustainable development for the communities you serve. What happens to your charitable objects when the country explodes into frenzied upheaval? What do you do when your community begins to lose its young people, shot dead by a police force under siege?

Waqf, a 1,400-year-old tradition of giving with roots in pharaonic Egypt

This has been the experience of the Maadi Community Foundation (*Mu'assasat Waqfeyat al Maadi al Ahleya*) in Cairo, Egypt, just four years old by the time the revolution erupted in that country earlier this year. The Foundation had been set up in May 2007 by **Marwa al-Daly** to provide sustainable funding and development for the communities of the al-Maadi and its adjacent suburbs. The Foundation was grounded in the communities it represented and firm in its belief that these would best be served by helping to fund income-generating and self-sustaining projects rather than the piecemeal acts of charity that had characterized philanthropy up to that point. Central to this idea was reviving and modernizing *waqf*, the donor-advised model of Egyptian endowment that dates back to ancient pharaonic Egypt (when monks endowed land to fund their temples) and is a 1,400-year-old practice of philanthropic giving in the Muslim world. *Waqf* had fallen into disuse, however, in part because control of all individual, historically autonomous *waqfs* had become the responsibility of a government ministry, the Ministry of Awaqaf:

I undertook a national study on philanthropy in Egypt in 2004–05, before the establishment of the WMCF, which showed that people like to give in their own community, probably because of the religious belief that 'al aqrabun awla bel ma'rouf' – those close to you by kin or geography are worthiest of your donation and help. So the religious legislation of zakat giving, for instance, says that you have to satisfy the area or your relatives and neighbours first before giving somewhere else. We also found that Egyptians are very philanthropic – they give, normal people, over US\$1.5 billion yearly donations to social causes that appeal to them. So we found that there's a lot of philanthropy, a lot of people giving money, but it was mostly going to charity, from one person to the other on an ad-hoc or occasional basis. And the main reason is that people, they prefer really to give to their communities, but they don't know how to do so in a self-sustaining fashion. On top of this, almost all existing structures are local NGO models that work in charity and that do not necessarily have the local philanthropists' trust or interest – because if the NGO can distribute money to poor people, and the giver can, he or she will do so without an intermediary. The donor-advised waqf – which allows people to engage in development and not charity – it just wasn't there for individuals. So it was the perfect timing to propose something, a route, that is not new to them, that is really embedded in the culture, that allows you to focus on your own community – but which at the same time is sustainable because it's a system that is following a philanthropic tradition that existed for thousands of years before.

Setting up the Foundation, the *Waqfeya*, was not without problems. The cultural and historical context in which it was set up was one of philanthropy tied either to occasions or times of year – Ramadan in particular – or to societies attached to mosques or churches. The result was a culture of dependence, in which beneficiaries came to the charities, community development organizations (CDOs) or mosques for a financial donation that was never enough to meet their needs and inevitably led to their coming back again or to seeking out another charity. And if the association was attached to a

religious establishment, the beneficiary's children would be tied into the obligatory attendance of religious classes, often neither of their choosing nor to their interest. Politically, too, philanthropy and charitable activity were firmly controlled by government and most organizations worked under the aegis of the government, as semi-government organizations.

I realized that most of the giving is charity, with only 0.6% of Egyptians interested in giving for social change or job creation, for instance. Most of the development work was done by big foreign-funded organizations that became experts in writing proposals and – primarily – meeting their funders' demands. They have a huge staff of highly paid personnel who change jobs when the aid money for the project cycle terminates. None of these foundations is sustainable, although they all, mostly, know that they should be.



The 'One Family' event – the American International School, in partnership with the WMCF, hosts 200 children from disadvantaged areas to fundraise for the Waqfeya.

Overcoming the resistance of the status quo

There is an in-built resistance to change in any status quo, compounded in this respect by the fact that the situation involved less work for the charities, and for the beneficiaries, too. But Marwa felt sure that nobody could be happy with this arrangement, and she was equally convinced that the answers to a community's issues must come from the community itself and must be delivered long-term and in a way that would lead to the empowerment of that community. Easy to see, in this respect, why there would be some resistance to this idea, not only from the government, but also from the financial institutions, from the community leaders, from religious bodies, from the influence of foreign ideas exported from other regions . . . from everyone, in fact, who had a vested interest in the continuation of the status quo, even if they were aware that the status quo wasn't necessarily working and wasn't making their life any easier either.

Marwa, though, had a sense that there was a real opportunity to develop something new, and that this would capture the imagination of a public keen to re-channel philanthropy into local communities and to do so in a way that was sustainable. 'When we did the philanthropy study, the results indicated that people like to give in their own community . . . [they] would want to do something sustainable but they don't find the

“venue” [to do so].’ The community foundation was thus the perfect model for reviving and modernizing this long-standing philanthropic mechanism.

Marwa’s key advantages were the conviction that there was untapped potential for the form of philanthropy she was promoting, the fact that there was the sense of a cultural shift that would enable her to make her case more acceptable, her ability to put forward an idea that (though it felt new at the time) had its roots in an old form of Egyptian giving – and her considerable reservoirs of energy, persistence and persuasiveness. But the first hurdle was to register the organization without coming into conflict with the ministry, especially given that there had been no existing community foundations before, and no independent *waqf* structures to use as reference points:

Actually just to register it as a community foundation and call it waqf was not easy and actually, until this point, if you considered the existing legal structures, it was not legal. It paved the way for others to be legally registered by imposing itself on the NGO map structure. Community members and influential people bought into the idea, and promoted it, and together we did a lot of lobbying with the minister of social solidarity, Mr Ali Almoselhy at the time. And he also became a believer of the importance of this structure in spite of the legal and power-related boundaries. He was the one who gave like a ministerial approval for the name and structure. It was a very complex and engaging process and we used research, our field research, and many people we worked with, of very good standing academically in the development world, to be part of this lobbying until it worked.

Building a local, independent profile

Once established with an official presence, the Foundation (*Waqfeya*) began to tap into the local community’s resources, persuading local philanthropists to contribute donations to set up a programme for income generation in the *Waqfeya* that would allow the Foundation to start small jobs for people while distributing their Ramadan bags – traditionally given to poor people in the fasting month of Ramadan. Volunteers were recruited primarily to engage in the food distribution in Ramadan but, more importantly, to be trained at the *Waqfeya* in how to assess the needs of a community and engage with people to discover their strengths and potentials. The volunteers and community members began to formulate plans for the community, identifying the opportunities created by local factories and industries (which would have leftovers that could be put to productive use by people in the neighbourhood), drawing up lists of people’s skills, and seeing where there were openings in the physical environment of the community for these skills to be put to productive use. By these means, the *Waqfeya* engaged small community-based organizations (CBOs) as potential grant receivers, in an attempt to shift their approach from charity to change-driven philanthropy.

The Foundation quickly became the hub for civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs in the area, a position helped in no small part by the establishment of an arts centre, Khan el Fenoun, that from day one taught art to community members, thereby generating income for the Foundation. The profit from the art classes and events supports classes and events that provide the same learning opportunities to those who cannot afford to pay and who live in shanty towns and other marginalized areas. The

centre and its art appreciation workshops bridge the social and economic gap, bringing together all segments of the community, and providing a physical venue, in particular, for children and young people. Workshops and seminars are strategically used to explain the concept of the foundation and of *waqf* and to invite people to participate and to donate. The key issue was to move people from one-off, dependency-generating donations to larger but sustainable donations:

Instead of giving 20 pounds¹ (approx. US\$3) to this woman – because actually this creates dependency and takes their dignity away – you give them at least 2,000 or 3,500 pounds (US\$350–550), for an income-generating project, nothing else, or to expand an existing project. And the gift is a rotating loan, but with zero interest. And even if they don't cover all the women, at least they cover those women who want to do a business – and they get empowered. In one year you find the difference. And you know, what's noticeable is that many of our young artists at Khan el Fenoun are our main fundraisers for the income-generation projects.



Marwa al-Daly, chairperson of the Waqfeyat al Maadi Community Foundation, discusses politically educational drawings painted by the foundation's Kahn el Fenoun Art Centre with women from Ezbet el Safih (an economically deprived neighbourhood in Cairo).

The empowerment of the individual, of course, leads to the empowerment of the community, and the empowerment of the community leads to the community generating funds from its own resources to run the projects to develop its own community – one reason why Marwa has always had a wary eye on international donations: 'For our community it would be a break [i.e. a breach in trust] because we started counting on local support and we would not get politicized money – that might break people's opinion of our work. We will not go in this direction.' So far the Foundation has received support only from the Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF), although it recognizes that, if it is to take on the staff to enable it to develop its work, or to undertake research and to produce booklets and literature about its activity (also, obviously, a fundraising tool), then the money to do so will have to come from an international source. But Marwa remains adamant that international donations will never account for more than 50% of the Foundation's income stream; more than this would remove one of the core strengths of the Foundation, which is that 'what makes us good or richer is that almost all our projects in the community are supported by local philanthropy'.

¹ At the time of going to press, the exchange rate was 1 Egyptian pound to US\$0.168

In the four years that it has been running, the Maadi Community Foundation has given several grants and training sessions to CBOs in surrounding shanty towns, created several donor-advised *waqf* funds (an average start-up individual donor-advised fund is around US\$20,000) and supported more than 150 income-generating projects; it has worked with schools, youth centres, banks, civil society organizations and movements and has held seminars, art appreciation workshops, sports events and community lobbying activities that have resulted in the establishment of a huge school complex in a surrounding shanty town (Ezbet el Safih Girls School). The foundation participates in all events in the community and supports young movements that seek to do good things in the community; it has clustered around it 2,000 registered friends and 1,000 volunteers, 300 of whom are active supporters and fundraisers. Many of these are young people and students, some of whom, for example, last year organized a fundraising event around a Christmas bazaar. Marwa made a presentation on *waqf* to the students, their parents and all the participants in the bazaar, which brought in more than 100,000 pounds (US\$20,000) and dramatically raised the profile of the *Waqfeya* in the process. There is a relatively small but constant pool of individual donors to the Foundation (about 50 or 60), but considerable, and equally consistent, fundraising and donating activity, much of it co-ordinated by young people, students and schoolchildren (the *Waqfeya* has thousands of friends and fans on Facebook and Twitter).

Getting guarantees

The banks have proved more resistant to persuasion than the ministries. Even before the recent Western financial crises, the Foundation found it difficult to secure special rates with banks for projects that supported development work:

There is a government bank but [it's] very complicated; we got a better rate, but still we didn't have the bank's guarantee . . . it's very difficult to change the bank's structure or the way they manage things, especially now. Now is no better. Everything is controlled by the Central Bank of Egypt, and many of the decisions are political.

The reluctance of the banks is in stark contrast to the trust shown by the Foundation to the individuals and the projects that it supports, a trust that is built on mutual respect with the community in which it operates. 'People in and around the disadvantaged areas we work in recommend each other and give guarantees about each other,' says Marwa. 'There is a system of mutual guarantee, collateral. So, for example, a bunch of 3–5 women guarantee that each one will give the money back – it gives more assurance.' There are conditions about the grants they give: they are given to support income-generating projects only, and on the condition that the money should grow, not diminish. These grants are given as zero-rated loans, but without any sense that the loan will be called back in if the recipient does not pay up:

We don't use any threats – the money is theirs. The only thing is [if you default] you will have less money to work with. And the potential that we can give you more, or that we support you in other ways, or that we recommend people to work with you,

is not there. And you know, since we started working like this about three years ago, nobody has not paid. From 150, none has not paid.

In a short period of time (just four years), the Foundation had established an official presence, rooted itself in its community and secured mutual trust and respect with the people and organizations it sought to support, and had developed an impressive body of volunteers and fundraisers.

And then, with the Arab Spring, came the revolution, and once again the *Waqfeya* found itself having to adapt its activities in a changing environment.

The revolution: and a revolution in the foundation's role

Things have changed dramatically for the WMCF since the revolution, are changing still, and will no doubt change constantly over the next few years. But the immediate effect of the revolution was to change the role of the Foundation: although it continued to fund projects as before, it found itself compelled to play an active role in the revolution, initially by supporting the families of the 'martyrs' who were killed in the course of the revolution:

Maadi lost 27 or 28 martyrs going from Maadi to Tahrir Square . . . the policemen killed them – shoot to kill it was, mostly in the head, and with live bullets. And for us, as a community foundation, we were not a political organization, but you cannot help supporting your community members in a time like this. After all, we realized that our mission was to revolutionize and change the status quo, and the revolution was just what we needed to accelerate our work. Our community members had fallen dead in their quest for social justice but they were our own loss, and their families became our pride and responsibility. It became our responsibility also to engage in helping them – and helping here is not to help them materially or financially: it was also to support their cause. And we found ourselves engaged in supporting their cause, which means we found ourselves engaged in human rights and meeting with activists and gathering people to go to demonstrate and go to the general attorneys ... That was our first test as a community foundation in a time of hardship, in an emergency.

The Foundation organized a funeral at the entrance to Maadi for the 27 martyrs (the number known at that time to have died), to honour them and mourn their death, but also to draw attention to their murder and their murderers: Mubarak, the Minister of Interior, and the Maadi and Dar AsSalam police station soldiers who shot them. The *Waqfeya* deliberately made this a large, public funeral: high officials and prominent people performed the funeral service, public figures and members of the martyrs' families (in a breach of tradition) spoke at it, and Coptic Christians and Muslim were represented by key religious figures speaking in solidarity and unity. In a further flouting of conventions, women and men mingled in the same areas of the funeral.



Young friends of Maadi martyrs, with WMCF board member Dr Fatma Abu Nawareg (fourth from right), discuss artistic expression in post-revolutionary Egypt at the foundation's premises, where community members meet frequently.

The funeral generated a discussion that continued afterwards on the Foundation's premises, and a pressure group was formed from the community members. With the martyrs' families, the *Waqfeya* also formed the first Martyrs' Families Association in Egypt for this neighbourhood of Maadi, Basateen, Dar AsSalam and Torah; the Association meets regularly on the *Waqfeya*'s premises, its official meeting place. Acting on behalf of the community, the Foundation enlisted the support of human rights activists and lawyers, and galvanized the community to act in unity and to confront the general attorney with the demand that the death of the martyrs be treated as a collective case against the murderers of the victims. The movement quickly attracted media attention and the support of prominent Egyptians (one of whom, a famous football goalkeeper, became their spokesperson) – and it became apparent that, very soon, people in high places were paying attention to what the movement was saying and doing, and treating it with respect. The *Waqfeya* organized several demonstrations, which attracted an increasing number of community members, until it became the reference point for the martyrs' legal cases, and the source of information on the numbers of injured people, and on the movements of young people involved in the area. The *Waqfeya* brought the case of Maadi to the General Attorney, who heard them and then rejected their demands. The judiciary and the South of Cairo General Lawyer, however, listened and acceded to their demands, and in the wake of the revolution the Foundation was asked to help the authorities monitor elections. Again, a development that they hadn't foreseen emerged from their primary involvement in the community they supported:

We were never an organization that was engaged in monitoring elections but we feel now that there is active civil society and they say 'We need you to help us'. So now we are getting volunteers, we are trying to train volunteers to do political awareness to people and to monitor elections with other human rights activists, so that in the coming months we'll be able to do a good job. I don't think we will do a terrific job because we've all been living in an authoritative rule for 30 years – and that's left its traces on all of us – but we are now beginning to enlarge our scale of partnerships and specialities and we've got a better understanding of what it takes to educate ourselves and our fellow members on the democracy we have never lived in before.

The Foundation's profile can be said to have changed significantly since the revolution. As well as preparing to monitor the elections, it has become involved in the whole area of education in democratic rights and social justice, concepts that had been largely alien to Egypt before the revolution. Children learning art at the Khan el Fenoun art centre, for

example, produced political awareness messages in the form of paintings for those who cannot read. This was the most effective tool to educate people on basic questions such as what is a constitution, why your voice counts, what is a parliament. Helped by children, the *Waqfeya* staff provided Training of Trainers (ToT) training for volunteers, to equip them with the tools to educate community members who were unable to read or write. This movement has led the Foundation to draw on links with the diaspora community in the United States and elsewhere, in order to help develop political information material about the parties and the process of voting. Meetings of young members of the diaspora and capacity-building workshops started to take place regularly at the *Waqfeya*, which many Arab Americans made their home in Egypt.



Training of trainers (ToT) for volunteers on evaluating and supporting economic development projects in preparation for community visits.

This link with the international community has not been without complications. Although the *Waqfeya* had in the past refused to accept money from bilateral donors such as USAID, foreign funding suddenly came into the spotlight again. Marwa has a suspicion that the huge influx of money into the country since the revolution is in large part panic money: ‘They’ve lost Mubarak, who was their ally, they need to create another ally in Egypt, and I think what they’ve figured out is that they should do it with money as they did with Mubarak as well.’ As a result, the money that used to go to big organizations working with USAID and the government, has started to go instead to smaller local NGOs, which again has distorted much NGO activity. The price of full-time staff has since soared, and their availability has diminished:

We as a community foundation decided not to take from USAID money because it’s very political and it doesn’t have a very good reputation. We are facing the challenge that many people are starting to get money, so again we are getting into the same dilemma: they are putting up the prices so that we cannot hire enough people if we want full-time staff. So we face many challenges; we would want to educate people that they have to be careful with foreign funding – they mustn’t fall into the dependency trap. And then you want to also influence the government that we want the legal status to change; and in the same time you have elections in one month and then you have also your work, the job creation, our own activities, you know.

Maximum impact, minimum exposure

The Foundation has played a careful game here. It has been at pains to distance itself from the media spotlight, making sure that, if there were to be filmed interviews at the public meetings in the wake of the 27 martyrs' funerals, those interviews would be conducted with members of the martyrs' families. Marwa recognized the possibilities for promotion that the Foundation's new-found position presented but made a conscious decision to avoid that at all costs, knowing that the very thing that brought the Foundation to the wider attention of the broader Egyptian community might also lose it the respect and the confidence of the Maadi community it was established to serve. While it was important to highlight the illegality of the martyrs' death and to campaign for greater social justice, it was equally important – perhaps more so – to provide for the families of the martyrs, many of whom had lost their prime breadwinner and needed immediate action:

So we fundraised very quickly and we started income-generating projects for these families. We gave them sustainable funding so that it was very clear that we were not giving them gifts – we were also investing in income-generating projects, so again it's philanthropy for development, as we seek to promote. And it was a very dignified process: they came as partners, they signed contracts, we had a celebration – very close, not to show off, just to show that we were working with them; it was a very small gathering. So I think that was for us a test of whether we were really a community foundation which people can trust and work with.

Some examples. A family of four girls, one older brother, their mother and grandmother lost their sick father just one month before the revolution, after spending all they had on his treatment. During the revolution, the son of the family was shot dead. The family had had a supermarket in a shanty town in a popular area, but were completely bankrupt following the double loss of their father and their one remaining breadwinner. The Foundation equipped the shop anew, and the family started work a couple of days after the son's death – activity that has proved their salvation. The Foundation has also made an agreement with an eye hospital to give operations to 150 people in the area who lost sight in their eyes, many of them as a result of their involvement in the revolution. A man working as a guard in one of the tall buildings on the Nile started a project to sell 'goodies' like sugar rice for the people in his area – the Foundation provided a seed fund for him to do this. Another bought a motorcycle to transport people to work. And one story shows the Foundation's two roles coming together:

One of our partners lost two brothers, both of whom died in Tahrir Square. He's an activist, and together with other farmers he took over the land that had been stolen by big government officials who are in prison now. They cultivated this land with food supplies, and – because they didn't pay anything for the land and really don't want a lot of profit because they consider this a public profit – they produce very low-price products. So, because people buy food baskets, we decided to make a project for them so that – instead of selling food baskets to supermarkets and giving them more profits and augmenting the value of the thing – we encouraged this association by partnering with them, and we will be making an outlet for people who would want to buy the food baskets, so they buy them from us, from our outlets. We're starting to

accept orders now – we have a thousand now – we will call it the political social justice Ramadan food basket (it is poetic in Arabic, in Egyptian) but the idea is that we will put all the material that we gathered in creating awareness and we will put it in this Ramadan basket as well.

There are many other cases similar to these. Marwa is convinced that, without this empowerment provided by the Waqfeya, the bigger case for the martyrs' right would never have been made.

Looking to the future

The last year has dramatically increased the number of people contacting the Foundation. At a time of financial uncertainty – businesspeople the Foundation might have approached for funds have by and large disappeared and international grantmakers are either paranoically insecure about investing in the Arab region or are themselves cutting budgets as a result of the global economic downturn – this has put immense strains on the Foundation, which has been unable to expand its staff to accommodate its new role. The current instability of the government only makes things worse for the Foundation: in theory, there is much greater openness at government and ministry level to the kind of activity the Foundation and other NGOs engage in, and much more sympathy for the changes in law that they believe would make their lives easier. But the ministries are in a mess, and the paperwork required to organize the day-to-day activity of the Foundation is every bit as burdensome as it ever was. On top of that, of course, there is the very real possibility that a government will be elected that is hostile to everything the Foundation stands for.

But there are huge pluses, too. The revolution brought to the surface what Marwa had long believed to be actively present in Egypt before: a strong civil society, characterized by considerable creativity and a firm sense of civil engagement. It has also changed the way in which NGOs operate, with many of them now campaigning together to bring about an element of social or governmental change, rather than chasing after the same international dollar. And, although the effect of the revolution has been to broaden the role of the Foundation (giving it a national profile much earlier than had been planned) and to drastically increase its workload, it has also broadened its reach within the community, developing its philanthropic capacity and increasing the sense of social cohesion.

More generally, there is a new spirit of hope and purpose, and a feeling of collective endeavour. Marwa has noticed the change most with the younger generation.

During the revolution a lot of children would go on the streets and clean. We are used to working with children and young people – but now we have more schoolchildren and very young volunteers – children aged between 5 and 15 – who are showing responsibility towards the country. This opens all sorts of doors for us to work with them more by building their capacity and by directing them to the right path. [. . .] We have a special class now on the revolution: the children write, they design the flag, they produce handicrafts that are black, white and red like the flag. So it's like

creating this sense of belonging and interest to make your place a better, a more beautiful place.

The WMCF has already come a long way since its establishment four years ago, riding a wave of Marwa's energy and enthusiasm, the devotion of the *Waqfeya* staff, community members, volunteers, interns and donors, the exuberance and commitment of the young people and children, and a sea change in the social make-up of Egypt. Delegations of Egyptians in the diaspora, too, are becoming more and more active with the Foundation.

It will have to be left to future updates to show whether the fall-out from the revolution will have added to or detracted from the social capital in the country. But for now the last word should go to Marwa and a conversation she had with Omar, a young child who had provided regular help with the fieldwork for the Foundation:

This 10 year old was saying 'Before, I thought that when I grew up I wanted to go to America' – that was the goal of all young people: to be something important would mean they'd have to go and travel – 'but now I don't want to go anywhere, I want to stay in Egypt and work here to make it better'. When you hear that from a child, someone who helps out filling in questionnaires, transporting equipment for projects, who's passionate about raising money for a family to start a bakery, you feel how amazing it is to have this chance, this time to provide them with ideals and outlets for what they want to do. And you see how they absorb . . . and how we really need to give them a chance to do this.

Website: www.waqfeyatalmaadi-cf.org (under re-construction)

Facebook group: <http://www.facebook.com/groups/Waqfeyat.al.Maadi.CF/>