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*Voices on Arab Philanthropy and Civic Engagement*

**“NOT PHILANTHROPISTS BUT REVOLUTIONARIES:  
PROMOTING BEDOUIN PARTICIPATION IN THE  
NEW EGYPT”**

By Hilary Gilbert and Mohammed Khedr al Jebraali • Working Paper, October 2012

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**‘Not Philanthropists but Revolutionaries.’ Promoting Bedouin  
Participation in the ‘New Egypt’:  
A Case Study from South Sinai**

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*In the West, spasmodically and with uncertain hands, we try now to eliminate the causes of sorrow; but it is only recently and since the decline of formal religion. The East still holds religion in its established forms and encourages philanthropy, which deals with effects and not causes. For as soon as you investigate and try to alter the origins of things, you are no longer a philanthropist but a revolutionary.....*

Freya Stark: The Southern Gates of Arabia (1934)

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## **1: Acknowledgements**

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## **2: Introduction**

### **2.1: Civil Society after the Revolution: Hope for Change?**

‘If Egyptians long for an irretrievable past’ wrote Adam Shatz presciently, six months before the 2011 Revolution, ‘it is because their future has been put on hold’. He outlined the outcome of Mubarak’s thirty-year dictatorship: ‘near-universal contempt for the country’s ruling class; a state whose legitimacy has almost entirely eroded’ (Shatz 2010: 5). When Mubarak - under US pressure to democratize - lifted the ban on opposition parties in 2005’s elections, few entertained the illusion that it represented a move towards substantive democracy. Shortly afterwards, following surprise gains by the Muslim Brotherhood, the opposition was suppressed as usual (Shatz 2010; Gardner 2011).

However, after the January Revolution the mood was entirely different. Spearheaded largely by young people - despite the political disengagement of their generation (Barsoum et al 2010; Wardany 2012) - it brought real hopes of the *’eish, horriya, musawiyya* - bread, freedom and equality - demanded by thousands in Midan Tahrir. Egyptians believed they had won for themselves the right to a government grounded in the principles and institutions of social democracy, including an expanded concept of citizenship covering economic and social as well as political entitlements (Luckham et al 2000). Key ingredients seemed to emerge that encouraged political voice: a new culture of participation and voluntarism, a plurality of newly-confident media and competing political parties - albeit still disorganized and fragmented in opposition. Above all, there was a discernible reduction in the climate of fear; the dismantling of the Interior Ministry released a sense of freedom to speak and associate unparalleled in

the lifetime of the revolution's young protagonists (ICP & JDGCP 2011). By April 2011, 89 percent of Egyptians in a national survey felt the revolution would make Egypt somewhat better or much better, with 80 percent expecting equivalent benefits in their own households (IRI 2011).

However, as Schmitter (1994: 57) asks: 'What will happen when well-entrenched elite practices are measured against long-subordinated ideals of equality, participation, accountability, responsiveness and self-realization?' While the worst fears of many - the overt resurgence of the *nizam al feloul*, the Old Order, with accompanying bloodshed - have not been realized, neither have revolutionary hopes of transformative change (Holmes 2012; Bishara 2012). The January Revolution opened a window of hope; but the view from that window remains far from clear. Especially obscure, its status in the new draft Constitution highly contested, is that aspect of a functioning democracy on which civic participation depends: the new legal framework for a free and active civil society that seemed possible in the heady days of the Arab Spring. As this publication goes to press, Egypt's NGOs continue to be hamstrung by some of the most restrictive legislation in the region, if not the world (Elbayar 2012; Julie Melton, pers comm).

NGOs - viewed as counterweights to 'big Government' - are seen as the standard-bearers of democracy in the neoliberal worldview that has sought to dominate Egyptian politics for decades (Mitchell 2002; 'Abdelrahman 2004; Gardner 2011). However, NGOs do not exist in a vacuum. Civil society as enacted by non-governmental organizations exists by definition in relation to the state; and in Egypt, state power has historically been used (with little effective objection from donor nations) to ensure civil society is either co-opted or systemically weakened. This has been effected through the bureaucracy governing the sector and also through its total depoliticization,

blocking both the day-to-day operation of NGOs and their ability to articulate the needs of their members.

Civil society is seen as facilitating democracy in part due to its ability to 'speak truth to power' - to articulate popular voice to policymakers. However, in Egypt this role is denied to NGOs. Many are co-opted by government, with Boards consisting largely of government appointees. Any activity deemed to be political in any sense - not just in party political terms - might under Mubarak result in asset seizure, closure and even imprisonment of personnel ('Abdelrahman 2004). Of 27 philanthropic organizations interviewed by Mona Atia in 2007, none could be found to describe its work as political (Atia 2008); post-Revolution this caution still applies (Herrold 2012). Whilst some commentators emphasize the positive role of NGOs in advancing the values and aims of the revolution (Herrold 2012), according to others the Mubarak regime's well-documented suppression of political roles for NGOs, including those focused on advocacy, systematically excluded civil society from any influence on policy-making. This rendered them effectively useless as agents of popular political voice, ensuring their irrelevance not only as actors in relation to the state but also as agents of the revolution ('Abd el Wahab 2012).

Bureaucracy operates in Egypt as an agent of the state, depending on state legitimacy and enforcing state power. The level of education required by the registration and licensing process for Egyptian NGOs deters all but an elite few, reinforcing the exclusion of the poor and the young from civic participation (Gomaa 1997; 'Abdelrahman 2004; Barsoum et al 2010). Burdensome monitoring by the Ministry of Social Solidarity, constantly changing regulations, dependence of every activity on arbitrarily awarded permissions, perennial delay and intrusive security surveillance mire the



sector's effective operation. New draft legislation was on the table, intended to replace the draconian Law 84 of 2002 that governs NGOs. While removing imprisonment as a penalty for infringements, it nonetheless retained the heavy-handed bureaucracy and centralized control of NGOs that deliberately hampered the growth of civil society under Mubarak (CIHRS 2012). The dissolution of the Parliament and controversial membership of the committee determining a new Constitution have removed even that limited palliative. As we shall see, in South Sinai's marginalized Bedouin communities, chronic disengagement from the state ensures that few if any venture to register an NGO. Social capital, of which civic participation may be seen as a key element, is stronger outside the state-sanctioned context of formal NGOs than within it (Putnam 1995; Gilbert 2009).

## **2.2: South Sinai, Bedu, and Egypt's First Community Foundation**

The development of South Sinai - the triangle between the 'horns' of the Red Sea - started abruptly in 1967 with the Israeli Occupation of the peninsula following the Six Day War. Since the resumption of Egyptian governance in 1982, multiple areas of contestation have grown up between the Egyptian government and the culturally and ethnically distinct indigenous Bedouin population of around 40,000, now mostly sedentarized but some still following mobile, agro-pastoral livelihoods. These disputes include land rights, access to services and natural resource management. South Sinai's natural resources have been heavily exploited by Egyptian commercial interests (often in breach of environmental regulations and damaging traditional Bedouin livelihoods), both in extractive industries and, predominantly, in tourism. South Sinai now contributes at least 20 percent of Egypt's tourist capacity, and 25 -30 percent of its vital tourist revenue (SEAM 2004: 7); but this has brought little direct benefit to *Bedu*, who

experience de facto exclusion from most mainstream employment. The result has been poverty, disaffection, and a profound lack of trust in the Egyptian government and its apparatus. Approximately half of South Sinai Bedu *in work* live around or below \$1 per person per day; while almost double the percentage (81 percent vs 44 percent) of South Sinai Bedu experience food poverty compared to the general population (Gilbert 2011b).

Distrust is heightened in South Sinai by perceptions of identity arising from the state's intention to 'Egyptianize' Sinai (ICG 2007; Gilbert 2011a). South Sinai Bedu, of course, are all Egyptian citizens, despite a widespread sense among Egyptians that they are 'Other': 'uncivilized and unskilled' (Aziz 2000: 33). Egyptian officials, according to Gardner (2000:51), 'can treat the Bedouins with mistrust at best, or contempt at worst.' Altorki & Cole (2006:12) suggest this hostility stems from the Bedu's being viewed as 'not really Egyptians' by the general population - and certainly not as loyal citizens. The intense securitization of the Sinai Peninsula reinforces a widespread perception by Bedu that they are singled out for state scrutiny. They are mistrusted, and they mistrust. Popularly blamed as Israeli collaborators, South Sinai Bedu are disbarred from serving in the Egyptian army and police; and uniquely among Egyptian citizens are locally disenfranchised, their city councils are not elected but appointed by South Sinai's Governor. Lawful resistance, and assertion of legitimate rights and entitlements, have thus been hampered by weak or absent political representation.

This is compounded by the fact that Bedu are invisible to policy-makers. The common failure in the Middle East to categorize Bedu either ethnically or as a pastoralist occupational group results in failure to acknowledge their specific needs. What Dawn Chatty (2006: 7) describes as 'official

government, and – apparently - international blindness or disinterest in identifying Bedouin’ results in many Bedu lacking legitimate channels for voicing or realizing their needs and aspirations as Bedu, and many feel that the state-citizen contract is inadequately fulfilled by their governments. South Sinai Bedu still differentiate themselves vehemently from those they call ‘the Egyptians’ (*al masri*), whose settlement policy means they are now outnumbered in their former lands<sup>3</sup>, and whose security apparatus controls their surroundings and their lives. Nonetheless, contrary to popular belief and a barrage of damning media reports, almost all are law-abiding citizens in practice. If their identity as Bedu renews itself in opposition to Egyptian hegemony, most are still aware that as citizens of Egypt they have rights, and that those rights and their needs are ignored or unrecognized.

Authorities often abdicate their civil responsibilities towards mobile pastoralist groups, treating them as second-class citizens who do not receive the full range of services provided by the state. Even governments that are well-disposed towards nomadic peoples struggle to justify the higher per capita expenditure required to provide a dispersed minority with services (Aronson 1980, Marx 2006), and in Egypt the government views Bedu with ambivalence at best. The failure to census Bedu separately, and the use of sampling frames for national surveys that assimilate them into the general population, result in official data that fail entirely to reflect their experience. For example, the Human Development Indicators for South Sinai are based on a sample derived from the voter registration index, a high proportion of which (- for reasons I shall return to later -) has been comprised of Egyptian settlers or migrant workers in urban centers. As a result, the Human

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<sup>3</sup> The Governorate of South Sinai (2009) estimates its population to be around 85000, of whom some 40000 are thought to be ‘rural’, a proxy for Bedouin. There are no more accurate data than these.

Development Indicators (HDIs) record that 88 percent of South Sinai's population receives piped water; whereas just 2 percent of our Bedouin research sample (of which more below) received it. Five times more Bedu fetch their water on foot or by pack animal than receive it through pipes; but they are invisible in the Human Development Report (UNDP 2005; Gilbert 2011b). Bedu thus occupy a policy blind-spot; their lack of education, prospects and material goods, and above all their chronic poverty relative to the Egyptian population, are unrecognized and unaddressed by the state (Gilbert 2011b).

These findings emerged from a research program conducted by the authors in 2007 and 2008; 122 individuals in and around the St Katherine Protectorate were interviewed in Arabic, mostly in their own homes, about a wide range of demographic, economic, social and environmental issues. An additional survey of 85 households provided data on living conditions for around 10 percent of the Protectorate's Bedouin population. The findings provided both a PhD study of the impacts of development on South Sinai *Bedu*, and a rich source of information for our emerging Community Foundation, established at the same time by a group of British, Egyptian and Bedouin colleagues.

Registration of the Community Foundation for South Sinai <sup>4</sup>(aided by the connections of our Egyptian trustees) took a surprisingly nifty eighteen months; and we were registered as the first community foundation in Egypt in November 2006 - *al mo'assessa-t-al ahliya lijanoub sina'* (referred to in what follows as 'the *mo'assessa*'). The *mo'assessa* has grown slowly by design; using a natural simile that accords well with the outlook of those we

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<sup>4</sup> Registered in el Tur # 2006-02. I have written elsewhere about the process and philosophy behind setting up the *mo'assessa* (Gilbert 2009) - HG.

work with, we say we have planted a seed, and are watering it slowly so it puts down strong roots. We expect it to grow in time - *insha 'allah!* - into a shady tree that will outlive its founders and support many people.

We chose the community foundation model due to the Chair's familiarity with its merits as a vehicle for sustainable and inclusive community support, and due to the presence in South Sinai of key success factors: namely visible need, available wealth, and - as we thought - a constituency of people committed to the area. Our aim was (and remains) to create a sustainable, endowed fund to support Bedouin communities through Bedouin-led activity. We take pride in our record of promoting Bedouin agency and participation; but fund development is proving more challenging in Sinai than in the socioeconomic climates in which the model evolved. Our initial plan to raise endowed funds (a keystone of standard community foundation practice) has not been abandoned but deferred in recognition of a financial crisis that erodes endowment income, and a political crisis that exacerbates tensions between Egyptians and Bedu. Egyptian donors willing to invest in Bedouin development are thin on the ground at this point; international donors are put on edge by negative media coverage of Sinai; and most Bedu cannot dream of donating at the level needed to build endowment. However, small-scale local donors are on the increase, and many more contribute in time and kind according to local norms, as happens in other poor communities (Wilkinson-Maposa et al 2008). We are therefore spending the limited assets we have, while fully committed to replacing and augmenting them in future.

The dearth of NGOs in South Sinai<sup>5</sup> has meant a further shift of approach, doing less grant making than a ‘standard’ community foundation and more hands-on development of our own. Aiming for an evidence-based approach to practice, our activity and spending priorities have emerged from our research as well as constant contact with local people. Much of our spending has supported work to improve access to water in this hyper-arid desert region, primarily through building and improving wells. We give regular educational bursaries permitting Bedouin children to attend school; pay medical bills for many people in hardship; provide flood relief, veterinary care, and food parcels in Ramadan; and undertake small-scale projects helping people improve their livelihoods, such as teaching women to make felt from their own wool, building a community olive oil press, and starting a livestock bank to help families in poverty. Some of this work is funded from our own resources, some from funds raised by the Board from both Egyptian donors and visitors to Sinai; and some from small grants. Support from the Global Fund for Community Foundations has been critical in helping us to build capacity and professionalize our operations; so that, while we remain a very small body indeed, our combined skills, resources and local contacts enable us to punch above our weight.

So far, so charitable - so acceptable, so safe. However, the January Revolution also revolutionized the *mo’assessa*’s operation, expanding our work and its impact exponentially. With a hitherto disengaged population, and a repressive political environment not yet geared for real change, how has a tiny NGO succeeded in promoting participation across an entire region of Egypt?

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<sup>5</sup> Egypt is thought to have 16-18000 NGOs, some 53 of which are registered in South Sinai. Most are inactive.

### **2.3: A Window of Opportunity, and ‘How We Choose’**

A degree of popular euphoria followed the Revolution, as people took advantage of freedoms that were previously denied them. One was to speak openly about politics in the knowledge that the Interior Ministry and its intelligence services had been disbanded - albeit, as it turned out, temporarily. On May 25, 2011 a meeting was held in St Katherine as part of a series rolled out across Egypt by the Cairo-based Culture and Education for the Child and Family Foundation (*al mo'assessa-t-al thaqafa wa al ta'aliim lilatfaal wa al 'a'ila*). Its working title was *Ezay Nakhtar: How we Choose*. Apart from the authors, the thin audience included a few senior Bedu, four women, and a number of local officials including the Ministry of Social Solidarity officer to whom the *mo'assessa* reports. As the facilitator explained how Egypt had declined under Mubarak, the key problems that led to the revolution, and what qualities to look for in the new leadership, we asked how it was that he could stand in a public arena and cover such topics, which we understood were illegal under Law 84/2002. The public assurance was given - and received unchallenged by Ministry officials - that provided no political party was promoted, it was perfectly legal to discuss empowerment and how people could exercise their rights. It was immediately clear to us that what this Cairene foundation was doing for Egypt, our foundation should do for South Sinai. While it would be impossible to ask the facilitators - sharp-suited, silk-tied and shiny-shoed - to deliver it themselves in our remote desert communities, we obtained their permission to adapt their approach.

Our program, then, was conceived in a brief window of opportunity when the freedom to discuss community empowerment was sanctioned by a state apparatus too shaken to contradict its challengers. We saw it as an

opportunity to generate positive change; to give people a belief in their own agency. Having suffered more than most from the old regime, many Bedu were effervescent at the prospect of change, and of a more inclusive new order. Along with them, we believed they had a chance, post-Revolution, to create a place for themselves as active citizens with a voice, articulating their needs to politicians prepared to respond to them. The problem was first that most Bedu have learned to believe that nothing they do as individuals can make much difference; and secondly, that many communities have no access to information on which to base decision-making. Occasionally, this is because they are still mobile. More often they live in communities with limited or no electricity and therefore little access to broadcast, let alone print media. Even in St Katherine, whose 5000 people comprise the biggest town for 120 Km, no newspapers are available to inform debate. The total absence of education in some communities, and poor provision in others, hampers informed discussion. For women, this is compounded by cultural conservatism; Bedouin women's voices are almost never heard outside the home. Social media played no role in galvanizing Sinai's youth.

In larger towns on the coasts, however, the new political developments were avidly discussed, especially by the young, and some young women even joined public meetings. Community leaders wanted us to help people embrace the coming changes (one Jebeliya Sheikh suggested the *mo'assessa* might train women for roles as community advocates). At the same time leaders saw democratization as a survival strategy, recognizing the huge potential damage to South Sinai's lifeblood - its tourist industry - if external fears of political instability were not allayed. With elections just a few months away, we wanted to help encourage this newfound potential for civic engagement, confirm a sense that Bedu can think for themselves about how to create a better future and give people a chance to learn experientially that



the choices they make can make a difference. However, the window of opportunity would not be open for long.

### **3: Making Bedouin Voices Heard**

#### **3.1 Our Program: Aims and Implementation**

Working with materials adapted from the original workshop and in discussion with two funders - the Global Fund for Community Foundations and the US Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) (to whom I return below) - we developed a program that we called Making Bedouin Voices Heard. Our object was to promote civic participation, with a particular emphasis on young people and women, by giving people general information about the Revolution and its implications; by informing people of their right to exercise their vote and to make their voice heard as citizens using democratic channels; and to discuss priorities in their own communities so as to identify issues on which they could take collective action. This, the first phase of a two-part project, ran from July to November 2011.

We planned to run separate, facilitated meetings for men and women in fifty communities across South Sinai. Each community would be visited in advance by our Coordinator, meeting dates and venues chosen and any specific issues identified in advance with community leaders. The leaders would then promote the meetings. Facilitators - both men and women - were identified and trained by our Coordinator and his sister. A remarkable young woman, she is one of very few Bedouin girls to complete her secondary education and almost unique in having gone on to study law. She was thus perfectly suited to the task, providing a role model for girls whilst able to travel respectably among strangers in distant communities, being

accompanied by her brother. This consideration may sound minor, but was crucial to the early success and acceptance of the meetings: everything we have done, uniquely, has been done by Bedu working with Bedu within Bedouin cultural norms. As we shall show, this has given us a unique ability to reach remote, conservative communities with which no-one else has previously engaged.

After discussion with local community leaders, we appointed five men and five women facilitators from several different tribes across the region. It was much harder to identify women prepared to take on this public role, and all of those recruited were unusual: most had grown up in urbanized Bedouin communities in cities such as Suez or el Tur, and had trained for professional roles such as nursing or administration. However, their being Bedu enabled them to relate to and communicate with Bedouin women from remote rural communities, where no such opportunities exist, on the basis of shared identity. No Egyptian woman could have done this. We also took the decision that the *mo'assessa's* Chair, as a British woman, should not attend the meetings so as to create no obstacle to their Bedu-on-Bedu character: our object was to generate trust, and any introduction of external elements could have provoked anxiety, curtailed expression and limited our impact.

Our planned 50 meeting places were decided by our Coordinator and Bedouin trustee, both of whom have extensive knowledge of the area. The map at Figure 1 shows South Sinai and our meeting sites. In some areas no sites are visible, for example in the high central massif, low-lying coastal plains and northern plateau, which are largely uninhabited due to their altitude, lack of water or remoteness. However, there are other communities which we decided not to visit. These were primarily remote places where there is no work at all: in some men leave their homes to find work

elsewhere, leaving their women unprotected; in others, the lack of legal employment has led people to grow drugs. In neither case would a visit by strangers from outside the community be welcome, so we avoided them.

We were completely taken aback by the strength of response to our meetings. The original *Ezay Nakhtar* meeting, held in a central venue in St Katherine, attracted just 15 people including ourselves. At our meetings, held eventually in 62 towns, villages and remote desert hamlets, average attendance was 44. No fewer than 2749 people - approaching 7 percent of the whole estimated population - having been offered an arena where they could speak out safely, came together to discuss their ideas, rights and priorities.



**Fig 1: South Sinai showing locations of 62 community meetings.** Areas not covered are either uninhabited or compromised by illegal activity.

(Source: Francis Gilbert/ M al Jabaali)

Recognizing their potential to deliver significant data in addition to their primary development function, we treated the meetings as a research

exercise. We collected data not only about attendance and voting intention, but also demographic and attitudinal information based on a national survey (IRI 2011). As a result, we can compare both the nature of our population and key aspects of its response to the Revolution with a national dataset. These findings are set out in the next section.

Not long into the program a critical obstacle to Bedouin civic participation emerged. We had always known that Bedu were under-registered: they are subject to a Catch-22 whereby they cannot travel without ID, but cannot get ID without travelling. Older people born before the onset of development had no means of registering their children's births, and many we interviewed in 2007-8 did not know their own age or birthday. Even for younger people, the difficulty of travelling miles across the desert to an administrative centre, and the necessary subjection to bureaucratic surveillance, has deterred many people from registering themselves or their children as citizens. (This is one reason why official statistics often ignore Bedouin experience; the sampling frame for national surveys is the registration index, on which we estimate at least half the Bedu fail to appear.) As we show below, our meetings greatly increased the numbers of people who wanted to vote; but a large majority of people were not registered and so were ineligible. We therefore appointed a further five Bedouin facilitators, who returned to our communities with information about the paperwork and processes required for registration. We then stationed them on a rota in registration offices around the region, helping people negotiate the process of registration and an often hostile or corrupt bureaucracy. Our team was in action for just four weeks in October-November: but during that time alone, 4230 new Bedouin registrations were recorded across South Sinai, representing more than 10 percent of the whole estimated population. This was an unprecedented development that was to have important implications at election time. **3.2: Results**

### **3.2.1: Bedouin vs. Egyptian Demographics and Attitudes**

In April 2011, the International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted a national survey to test Egyptian attitudes to the Revolution, the government and hopes for the future, and to assess the relative importance of different media and information sources in influencing public opinion. The survey also obtained demographic data such as age, educational status and income levels. The sample size was 1200, equally divided between men and women, and with an age profile which the authors note reflects that of the general population (IRI 2011)<sup>6</sup>. To triangulate our own findings within a national framework, in addition to collecting primary data from the discussions our facilitators were asked to select one man and one woman at random in each of our planned 50 meeting locations, and conduct (having obtained their permission) a short additional survey based on a subset of the IRI instrument. Datasheets from four meetings were not returned, giving us a sample size of 96, likewise equally split between men and women. This randomized sample enables us to make valid comparisons between Bedu and the national dataset.

The South Sinai age profile differed significantly ( $\chi^2 4 = 9.95$ ,  $p=0.04$ ) from the national in being more heavily weighted towards young people, as shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Age profile of SS meeting attendants vs Egyptian survey respondents/population**

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<sup>6</sup> We appreciate of course that the inclusion of the International Republican Institute in the Supreme Council of Armed Forces' crackdown of December 2011 cast doubt on the legitimacy of its operations in Egypt. However, we were satisfied with the validity of its survey instrument (run months in advance of the organization's suspension), which we had judged would provide useful quantitative data to compare with our regional survey. We are therefore happy to reproduce our findings here, as we remain satisfied that the methodology is sound, and that our findings are in no way influenced by the national survey's originator.

<b>Indicative age range*</b>	<b>Egypt percent</b>	<b>South Sinai percent</b>
18-24	34	38
25-34	24	31
35-44	19	15
45-54	15	8
>55	8	3

\*Age range categories for South Sinai sample adjusted to match national data.

The difference in the younger age ranges may partially reflect the fact that 58 percent of our attendees were aged 25 or younger, and the vast majority under 35. Since the South Sinai demographic profile suggested by our earlier research roughly matched national age and gender norms (Gilbert 2011a), it is reasonable to attribute the disproportionate numbers of youth in our meetings to their thirst for involvement and change. The gap between the national sample and ours grows significantly wider when we consider educational status, shown in Table 2. It may well account for the youth weighting among our attendants, which makes these figures all the more shocking: if, as Wardany (2012) argues, Mubarak's policies comprehensively failed Egypt's young people, Table 2 shows graphically that none have been failed more completely than young Bedu ( $\chi^2_5 = 320.0, p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 2: Educational status of SS meeting attendants vs Egyptian survey respondents**

<b>Educational status</b>	<b>Egypt percent</b>	<b>South Sinai percent</b>
No education	7	44
Primary/elementary only	17	47
Secondary	32	8
Professional training	15	0
University	26	1
Postgrad qualifications	1	0

We did not ask our sample to tell us their income; however data from our earlier research compare instructively with the IRI sample. 27 percent of IRI respondents did not know or declined to divulge their income. If, to reach an indicative figure, we divide the IRI's 'Do not Knows' equally between the three income brackets in their national survey, we obtain the picture at Table 3 below. This corroborates the higher rates of poverty among Bedu noted earlier (Gilbert 2011b): even if we allocated all the IRI's Do not Knows to the poorest category, there would still be more Bedu than Egyptians in it.

**Table 3: Indicative income figures, South Sinai Bedu vs Egyptian population**

<b>Income per month</b>	<b>Egypt percent</b>	<b>South Sinai percent</b>
< EGP 1000	39	62
EGP 1000 - 5000	49	29
> EGP 5000	13	9

Source: South Sinai - Gilbert 2011a: 154. IRI figures as published: <1K: 30 percent; 1-5K 40 percent; >5K: 4 percent; DK/refused: 27 percent

Our random sample, then, although drawn from an equivalent demographic, was biased towards youth relative to the national survey, and was significantly poorer and less educated. How did this affect people’s response to the Revolution and the government, and who influenced their opinions and voting intentions?

Bedu initially took a more pessimistic view of the Revolution than other Egyptian citizens. Asked what the impact of the Revolution would be on the country, 53 percent of Egyptians expected things to get much better, with 11 percent predicting it would get worse. By comparison only 36 percent of Bedu expected real improvement, with almost as many - 30 percent - predicting things would decline. In the meetings themselves this trend was exaggerated: once people focused not on remote events in Cairo but on what was happening in their own area their negativity increased: just 26 percent of communities were assessed by facilitators as rating the impact of the Revolution positively, while 48 percent felt its impact had been damaging. Positive assessments were supported by comments reflecting the importance of freedom; sometimes this meant political freedom - to choose new leaders,



and to enjoy equality with Egyptians, to form a union for fishermen. For women, positive comments reflected the sense that a change in their status was possible: seeing our female facilitators travelling, working and taking a public role helped them believe that change was on its way for them, too.

Most commonly the hoped-for freedoms had a practical character: to travel without detention at checkpoints, to build houses without fear of arbitrary demolition, to bear arms in self-defense, to demand the right to work.

Negative comments almost all had an economic basis: South Sinai depends on food imported by road, and in the instability following the Revolution supplies were disrupted causing severe food shortages. Tourist numbers also collapsed during the period. One man in a coastal town summed the situation up succinctly: ‘Most of us here work in fishing or tourism. The Revolution has damaged tourism and left people with no money to buy fish.’ Women’s concerns dwelt equally on food shortages, but were compounded by fear that in the post-Revolution security vacuum their menfolk would turn to growing drugs - a regular income source but one that is both illegal and *haram* (forbidden by Islam). Far fewer women than men in our meetings were very positive about the Revolution (20 percent vs. 33 percent); rather more women than men were very negative (50 percent vs. 46 percent). One community broadly summarized women’s response: ‘We hope for long-term change, but there are too many short-term problems. When we are hungry, we cannot escape like the men. We cannot feel the benefits of the Revolution yet.’ Along the coast, however, men saw the Revolution differently: ‘Now there is more freedom and less food. But freedom is more important.’

Confidence in the government was markedly lower among Bedu. Some 39 percent of Egyptians expressed themselves ‘very confident’ in the government’s ability to tackle the issues facing the country, compared with

just 6 percent of Bedu. While 21 percent of Egyptians 'did not feel at all confident' in the government, 51 percent of Bedu held that view.

Bearing in mind the widespread characterization of the January Revolution as a phenomenon of social media, we asked people what was their chief information source about its events. Their answers were not directly comparable with the IRI survey (which allowed multiple answers to this question). However, while 97 percent of Egyptians said their main source of news was TV, just 51 percent of our sample said so, with 40 percent volunteering that they have no TV. 34 percent of Bedu relied mainly on word of mouth for information. While 28 percent of the Egyptians polled relied on internet news or Facebook, just 4 percent of Bedu chose this option: 89 percent had no internet access.

We also asked, following the IRI, which bodies or individuals most influenced our respondents' opinions; and again the results show significant and revealing differences, set out in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: Question: Who has the biggest influence on your opinions?**

<b>Source of influence</b>	<b>Egypt percentage</b>	<b>South Sinai percentage</b>
Religion/religious leaders	15	2
Political party	7	4
Military	36	7
Friends & family	66	76
Unions	3	n/a
Sheikhs	n/a	7

There are two outstanding statistically significant differences in Table 4 ( $\chi^2 = 41.7, p < 0.001$ ): between those influenced by the military and by religion. The first is unsurprising given both the disqualification of Bedu from military service, and the heavy-handed security presence in Sinai. Bedouin experience of the military is characterized by repeated stops at checkpoints delaying every journey; and by strong-arm tactics designed to intimidate, such as the arbitrary destruction of gardens and farms. While more popular than the police, the army is clearly identified by Bedu as an oppressive arm of the state, not a benign source of security (ICG 2007; Gilbert 2011a).

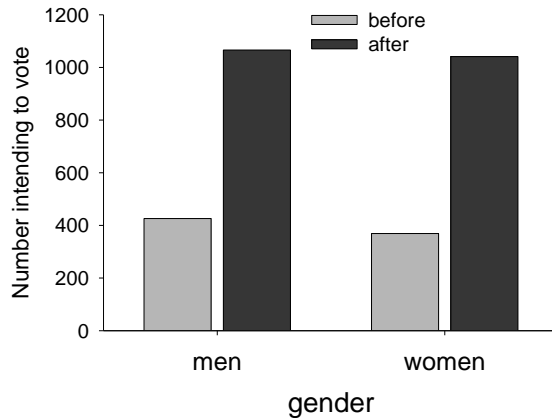
The minimal role of Islam in shaping Bedouin opinion - especially amongst the young - is more profoundly significant. It has become a commonplace in media reports and policy circles that Bedu have become radicalized, and that the rise of militant Islam among Bedu is a growing threat. While there is some evidence that this may be a consideration in North Sinai (ICG 2007), in the South we see no evidence to justify this view. Our survey, weighted

towards the young, shows a significantly lower interest in political Islam than in Egypt as a whole (as did the election results discussed below); while in our previous research religious concerns were prioritized by only a handful of elderly respondents (Gilbert 2011a). The Bedu, while Muslim, have always been somewhat unorthodox (Marx 1977); their recent portrayal as linked to *jihad*-inspired terrorism has no discernible justification in South Sinai.

### **3.2.2: Community Meetings Phase I: Figures and Outcomes**

The 62 meetings we eventually held before the elections, then, were attended by 2749 people. Across the whole group women were slightly outnumbered by men (48 percent to 52 percent); however amongst young people under 25, girls had the edge at 53.5 percent. 58 percent of our attendants were under 25; since 18-24 year-olds account for just 36 percent of the population in Egypt (Barsoum et al 2010: 3), and few of our attendants could be classed as children, we knew we had effectively attracted young people of an age to take part in shaping their country's future.

As we have seen, South Sinai Bedu are educated, work and think very differently from the general Egyptian population. What was the practical effect of these differences on people's voting intentions? The IRI poll found 95 percent of its Egyptian responders were somewhat or very likely to vote in the elections then scheduled for September 2011. As we might expect, South Sinai departed from the norm. At the start of each meeting our facilitators counted all those intending to vote. Just 29 percent initially intended to do so; but by the end of the meetings, that figure had risen to 77 percent - an increase of 165 percent.



**Fig 2: Increased voting intention before and after 2011 community meetings, by gender**

Since participation is negatively correlated with both illiteracy and poverty, both far higher among Bedu, this conversion rate is striking. We convened the meetings in the hope of increasing civic participation, but we did not anticipate generating effects on this scale. Our rates of participation among women and girls, roughly equaling men and boys, not only overturned local cultural norms but bucked the national trend: in Egypt far fewer young women register to vote than young men (8 percent vs. 16 percent - Barsoum et al 2010). We believe they overturned expectations and turned out because - for the first time - we ran special meetings for Bedouin women, facilitated by Bedouin women. They came with the support of their men because we visited community leaders in each location first, explaining the importance of women's participation and answering their concerns. Women, who normally lack any kind of public forum, therefore knew they could attend safely, speak and be listened to, and in some places travelled miles over difficult terrain in order to attend. They expressed strong views of their own, often registering opinions very different from men from the same place.

Many welcomed change and called strongly for better education, work opportunities and rights for women.

In only two of our 62 locations did voting intention fail to increase in response to the meetings; they were neighboring, equally disaffected communities in an area of high Bedouin unemployment, surrounded by industrial plants which employ only Egyptian migrant workers. In that area alone people's disillusion with the system was too entrenched to be shifted. Everywhere else people expressed hope that the new system could bring positive change that they wanted to share in.

We judged that, in terms of our primary aims of promoting Bedouin civic participation, emphasizing women and youth, our meetings had been a success. However, the near trebling of voting intention, and helping over 4000 people obtain voter ID, were not the only - or even the most important - outcome of the meetings. Directly or indirectly, they instigated a number of additional outcomes that affected both Bedouin participation and the January 2012 elections.

First, our program put many Bedu on the demographic map for the first time. As we have noted, unregistered people are not included in the sampling frame for national demographic studies. Their small population compounded by under-registration means Bedouin experience has not been reflected in national datasets, meaning their needs as citizens go unrecognized by state policy-makers and planners. It is possible that the drive to register will start to address this gap, providing an impetus for policy change.

Second, as a result of our meetings twelve young Bedu decided to put themselves forward as candidates, of whom three were young women. In a society that still keeps women largely confined to their homes to protect the

family's honor, this was a striking development. None made it past the first round of voting, but their stepping forward with family support marked a cultural step-change. Although not elected, several of our young candidates are now playing an active part in their communities as *mo'assessa* Link Volunteers (a role we explain below). In Egypt, youth civic engagement is minimal: just 12 percent are registered to vote, and 2 percent involved in voluntary activity (Barsoum et al 2010). Moreover, both activities are positively correlated with wealth, and Bedu, as we have seen, are among Egypt's poorest people. The response of these young Bedu is therefore of real significance, their eagerness to act on their ideas representing what el Taraboulsi has described as 'intangible aspects of youthful expression in public space' (ICP/JDGCP 2011: 9), and turning the desert into public space for Bedouin women, arguably for the first time.

At the January parliamentary elections Bedouin turnout at the polls - although not officially recorded - was reportedly far larger than usual. It resulted in a Bedouin landslide: 8 out of the 12 South Sinai representatives elected were Bedu, including the first independent Bedouin woman MP. One at least stated publicly - while thanking them - that the votes of newly-registered Bedouin women had carried the day. Those elected stood on independent, not party political tickets (corroborating the lack of interest in parties emerging from our survey). In this gerontocratic country, all were under 40. In marked contrast to the rest of Egypt, of the 12 seats only two went to Muslim Brotherhood candidates; as suggested by our data, the results reflected a lack of interest in political Islam, let alone militancy, among ordinary Bedu. For the brief period before the generals procured the dissolution of Egypt's first democratically elected Parliament, South Sinai Bedu were properly represented for the first time in history.

We were further encouraged - paradoxically - by the events that led to the first poll in South Sinai being invalidated and re-run. In el Tur, the regional capital and counting centre, election officials were confused to find two whole ballot boxes more than usual had been delivered from Bedouin areas, containing approximately 4000 votes. Unsure how to deal with this unexpected situation, they decided to burn them (see Goodman 2012). A number of Bedu caught them in the act and reacted angrily, capturing their actions on mobile phones. Instead of employing the standard protest tactic of blocking the road with burning tyres, with the help of a Bedouin lawyer they took their protest - and their camera-phone evidence - to the judge in Isma'iliya overseeing the electoral process. He upheld their complaint, cancelled the ballot and ordered a new poll. This was a new departure: in the past corruption was regarded as a fact of life, whether met with resistance or resignation. This time Bedu took collective action to challenge it through appropriate lawful channels, and - even more remarkably - were upheld. Disappointingly, almost all the press coverage of this event spoke of 'Bedouin disrupting the elections in el Tur' and 'Bedouin rioting because their candidates did not win' (Fahmy 2012 sets the tone).

Nothing like this program has been attempted before in South Sinai Bedouin communities, and no-one else is currently engaging with them. The fact that someone took the trouble to go out to meet people where they were, to take their concerns seriously, has been abundantly appreciated. We have been told this countless times (including in improvised verse!). Giving people the conceptual tools to become active participants rather than passive subjects has had a galvanizing effect far beyond our expectations. We have been cautious in interpreting these outcomes as directly caused by our intervention; yet the evidence suggests it has been responsible at least for



igniting a fire that has kept on burning by itself, fuelled by a long-standing sense of exclusion and injustice.

### **3.2.3: Community Meetings Phase II: Work in Progress**

Our program was designed, in the heady days of Spring 2011, to deliver two sets of meetings: the first to inform people about the Revolution, what it meant for them as citizens, and what qualities they might look for in new leadership; the second, to help people consider their rights and responsibilities as citizens, and how they might exercise both in addressing community priorities. In many places, community priorities formed a natural part of the first discussions (jobs, access to water, land rights, education and healthcare, and women's rights comprised the overwhelming majority of issues raised, with jobs almost always pre-eminent). The second round of meetings, winding up at the time of writing, has therefore focused more on giving people tools to tackle issues themselves, mostly in the form of information and grassroots support. We have recruited male and female volunteers, each covering a small cluster of communities, to act as Link Volunteers (*mandub mutatawa'*) between the *mo'assessa* and local people. They provide a two-way flow of information, enabling us to be quickly informed of community issues, and channeling advice, information and support back to local people. The volunteers have been trained, alongside our facilitators, by some of the few Bedu who have made it into professional or public roles: notably a group of Bedouin lawyers who have donated their services to the project. Together with them, we have compiled information sheets giving council, healthcare, National Park and other contacts for each area of the region. Thus, if anyone has a complaint about treatment or services, they know who to contact. However, one predictable consequence of underdevelopment is that many people lack the confidence or the

terminology to voice their concerns so that officials will listen. One young Awlaad Sa'iid man told us: 'We have no education. We cannot stand up in front of people. We do not even have the right clothes.' If people lack the confidence to tackle the issue themselves, their trained Link Volunteer will support them. We hope our volunteers will also galvanize local action on collective community issues and bring them to the *mo'assessa*'s attention.

The same team of trained Bedu has returned to our original meeting sites, now further increased to 75 as our facilitators respond to requests to visit new places. 'Why not us?' communities have asked, in a clear demonstration of the program's impact. We cannot as yet analyze the data from this incomplete round of meetings, which will widen our understanding of community issues, employment and educational status of Bedu across the region, as well as showing how many put their voting intentions into practice. However, they are having a discernible impact which we can record in part.

In the context of structurally marginalized people, one may construe politically any factor promoting or reducing their capacity to enjoy equal benefits with their fellow citizens. Despite the rigorously non-party-political tenor of our meetings, many of the outcomes emerging from Phase I, discussed above, were explicitly political. Several others can more obviously be labeled as economic or educational; however, they may still be seen through the lens of power relations and interpreted in terms of their capacity to empower. This is particularly so of the Phase II meetings.

The first is the inclusion of deaf people in this process. There is a large population of congenitally deaf Bedu, especially among the Mzeina tribe. While this is poorly understood, it is likely to be linked to Bedouin marriage practice, which encourages first-cousin marriage and strongly discourages

marriage outside the tribe. Deaf people are chronically excluded and disempowered; although they use a local sign language they are often isolated, never educated and almost never employed. Observing their isolation from our Phase I meetings, our Coordinator proposed holding separate, signed meetings for them in Phase II. We trained six male signers as facilitators, and have run meetings for deaf men and women in 20 locations, using the same content and process as the mainstream meetings.<sup>7</sup> Nothing like this has ever been attempted, and it is hard to describe deaf people's response in the unemotional language appropriate to an academic paper. Our Coordinator reports: 'The atmosphere in these meetings is like a party. For the first time, they feel part of things. They feel they are human beings like everyone else.' A subsidiary project will enable us to establish a small farm employing deaf people, which we hope will be the first of several.

The second outcome is the dramatic increase in Bedu securing Government jobs. Around half of Bedouin men in the St Katherine area are self-employed in insecure casual work. Outside in the desert, nine times more men than in the towns have no work at all. Hardly any Bedu have been employed either by private concerns or by government (Gilbert 2011a & b). Factories may spring up in the desert staffed purely by Egyptian migrant workers, the Bedu in adjacent communities remaining unemployed. The very few Bedu so employed are always in low-paid, menial positions; and the resort-based tourist industry is staffed completely by Egyptian workers (Bedu are specifically excluded from Sharm el Sheikh). As a result, obtaining work is the most pressing by far of all the concerns expressed by local people, both in this program and in our earlier research.

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<sup>7</sup> The signers were accompanied by their wives at the women's meetings: it proved impossible to recruit women signers.

Although so few Bedu were employed by government, they - like other Egyptian citizens - have a right to be considered for state employment; however in this case, as with NGOs, state bureaucracy has been used strategically to perpetuate Bedouin inequality, providing endless reasons for discriminating against Bedouin applicants. To obtain state employment, there is a procedure to follow of which most Bedu, until now, have been unaware. Now, through our meetings, people have learned what to do, how to approach officials, how to insist on their rights and how to complain if they do not obtain them. As a result, in St Katherine alone, there has been a massive increase in Bedu employed in government jobs. The figures are given in Table 5 below.

**Table 5: Numbers of Bedu employed in government jobs, St Katherine, June 2012**

<b>Area of employment</b>	<b>Original number employed</b>	<b>Employed post-meetings</b>
Electricity generating company	1	27
City Council	4	17
Mosque ( <i>awqaf</i> )	2	15
Schools	4	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>91</b>

Source: M al Jebaali, own data

Although many of these jobs are unskilled and low-paid, unlike most available work in Sinai they provide regular wages, pension rights, and opportunities for advancement. We do not yet have access to regional data, but as there are eight administrative towns of which St Katherine is just one, we expect extensive improvements in Bedouin employment figures.

Another important and unexpected economic benefit is the new-found ability of thousands of people to access *tamwiin* - government-subsidized food supplies. Before the meetings many people in remote communities did not realize they were eligible to receive this benefit. Every head of household has the right to claim *tamwiin*, but to do so they have to be registered. Prior to the meetings many had no ID; but as previously discussed, in the month when we promoted registration, 4230 new Bedouin registrations were recorded. (The effective word-of-mouth grapevine in this community means it is safe to assume that many more people than attended the meetings will have registered subsequently.) If even 20 percent of them were heads of household ( a statistically reasonable assumption, since an average Bedouin family consists of five to eight people - Gilbert 2011a) an estimated 4000 - 6500 people may now have gained access to much cheaper food: a typical basket of *tamwiin* staples costs 20 -25 percent of commercial prices. As well as economic benefits this should bring health improvements: it is estimated that Bedouin children suffer more than treble the rates of malnutrition associated with Egyptian children (Gilbert 2011b).

These preliminary figures indicate the impact of knowledge and confidence on Bedu, both for individuals and the collective economy. If we couple this with reportedly soaring rates of young people registering for distance-learning university courses; reduction in medical costs due to new awareness of the right of ‘sons of Sinai’ to free primary healthcare; and with the

engagement for the first time of deaf people in the economy, we can see that these meetings have had an effect that goes deeper than electoral politics alone. As our Co-ordinator puts it: ‘They have woken up the people.’

#### **4: Discussion**

It is vanishingly rare for an NGO to be able to track its impact on a community so clearly; normally there are hundreds of confounding factors that might play a part in a given outcome. However, it is fair in this case to assume a high degree of causality: absolutely no-one else is engaging with our communities. In 2011, in pursuit of permission to build a well, the *mo'assessa* invited the Head of St Katherine City Council to visit a remote community. He came; it was the first time in his 15 years in office that he had ever gone into the desert, for whose residents he is responsible. With such indifference from governing officials, and often neither transport, electricity nor media of any kind, the only way to make people feel connected - to feel that they matter - is to go out and see them. That is what we did; and they responded. Our facilitators, at least, were in no doubt as to their impact. The day after the Parliamentary elections our phones did not stop ringing with elated people saying: ‘Look what we did!’

At one level, then, our story can be read as supporting evidence for the neoliberal truism that civil society advances participation and democracy. However, that would be a simplistic reading. A combination of elements have produced this outcome, most of which do not obtain in other Egyptian NGOs. Without the coincidence of these specific factors our ability to deliver the program would have been jeopardized. Before generalizing about civil society and democracy on the basis of our results, then, they need to be examined.

First, as a community foundation - albeit a rather unorthodox one - the *mo'assessa* locates itself as part of a growing and highly diverse global movement. Spanning every continent except Antarctica, community foundations range from massively wealthy, century-old North American institutions to tiny emerging players at the cutting edge of development in the global South (Sacks 2008; Hodgson & Knight 2010). Community foundations, while rooted in philanthropy, play a well-documented role as community conveners and leaders (Walkenhorst et al 2001; Bernholz et al 2005; Sacks 2008; Gilbert 2009; Hodgson & Knight 2010; Herrold 2012). Despite their diversity, community foundations tend to see themselves as a movement, stressing their broadly shared value-base. We may feel isolated in our own region, but the knowledge that others elsewhere are taking risks in pursuit of meaningful community development is significantly supportive. It is hard to overstate the value of the Global Fund for Community Foundations in forging links between emerging development-oriented foundations like our *mo'assessa* on the one hand, and the weight and influence of established community foundations on the other. That support gives us courage to take risks.

As well as a support network, our international composition has enabled us - in common with most internationally-linked NGOs operating here - to put financial arrangements in place that circumvent the delaying tactics of Egyptian bureaucracy. As a result, numerous Egyptian NGOs that were awarded support from the same funder are still waiting for Ministry permission to receive their grants, while our program is drawing to a close. Given that the aim of this funding stream was to promote participation in elections scheduled twelve months ago, it will be seen how effectively the Egyptian state has impeded its civil society. It is not safe to assume that in order to achieve democratic participation Egypt requires nothing but a bigger

civil society, more NGOs. Unless and until a new regime drastically liberalizes the legal framework in which they operate, Egypt's indigenous civil society will continue to be hamstrung. Much could be done to secure such improvements by more effective interventions from international donors (a cause currently pursued by the Dalia Association, the Community Foundation for Palestine); but while structural adjustment programs have been imposed absolutely, pressure on the Egyptian state to liberalize has been mutable, an optional extra subject to political expedience (Mitchell 2002; Gardner 2011).

Perhaps more importantly still, the *mo'assessa's* international composition has enabled us to bypass the prevailing national discourse with respect to Bedu. As we have seen, Bedu are a thorn in the side of the Egyptian state, and are perceived as backward and uncivilized. They may be seen as fitting objects of charity, but development efforts have focused almost wholly on perpetuating their place as 'traditional' people, locking them into the past and denying their aspirations as modern citizens - albeit citizens with a distinct identity. We have noted elsewhere (Gilbert 2011a) that one of the few development processes to achieve success in South Sinai, at least initially, was the St Katherine Protectorate: a flagship Protected Area funded by the European Union and led by European management, it made a point of consulting and working with local Bedu. Viewed from the perspective of what Ferguson and Gupta (2002) term a 'vertical topography of power', the Protectorate's initial responsiveness to the Bedu owed much to the exercise of a 'transnational governmentality'; that is to say, its international management enabled the elevation of local concerns usually overlooked by centralized state planners. Just as the Protectorate's original management was grounded in perspectives and values of international conservation that overrode national discourse, so the heterogeneous



composition of the *mo'assessa*'s Board has given us roots in the international community foundation movement, with similar effects. Overriding the national discourse of Bedouin backwardness, we have sought to potentiate Bedu to empower themselves.

If we have succeeded, then, we can attribute it to a combination of global vision and local roots not available to most Egyptian NGOs. In this authoritarian state it is not safe to equate the mere existence of NGOs with genuine participation. They may be a symptom of a healthy democracy, but where they are co-opted or repressed - as Egypt's fragmented opposition parties have proved all too clearly - they cannot alone effect one. Hickey and Mohan (2004:13) advise against undertaking participatory projects in places where the wider political climate is not supportive of them. The corollary of this well-founded advice is that NGOs who spearhead democratic engagement in authoritarian states may subject themselves to risk from which the cosily democratic associations of the West are totally shielded. This is certainly so in Egypt, where most NGOs and foundations have been deterred from active post-Revolutionary engagement (Herrold 2012).

Our program has been undertaken amid great tension, at a time when political will and popular voice have united (for once) in hostility toward external powers. These are perceived as manipulating Egypt's internal affairs for ulterior aims: what the then Prime Minister Essam Sharaf described as 'hidden hands - domestic and foreign - that meddle with the country's security and safety'.<sup>8</sup> This was manifest in a shrill media campaign in autumn 2011 discrediting NGOs in receipt of foreign funding, particularly from the USA. It culminated in raids, in December 2011, on the Cairo offices of several NGOs with external links, and the detention and subsequent trial

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted from a BBC news report following the Maspero massacre of 9th October 2011.

of Egyptian and foreign staff.<sup>9</sup> It was a period of great anxiety. Our team was determined to complete the program in spite of warnings from the Ministry and security service; we succeeded in part because - unlike many of the targeted organizations in Cairo - our other work is demonstrably charitable in intent and effect, and our meetings could legitimately be presented as community needs assessment.

Despite the unjustified singling out of NGOs for attack, Egyptian suspicion of the 'hidden hand' is far from irrational. There are multiple examples of the political manipulation of Egypt by the USA, from the reversal of Egypt's opposition to the first Gulf War in exchange for the writing off of debt, to the use of Egypt's prisons in the 'extraordinary rendition' of suspects in the 'war on terror' (Mitchell 2002; 'Abdelrahman 2004; Gardner 2011). With revolutionary feeling and hope for change current throughout 2011, it is unsurprising that Egyptians should seek a new order based on political autonomy; for Egypt to shape future policy in its own image rather than Washington's. Writing on how participatory development might be delivered with a clear conscience, analyst Bill Cooke's prescription was: 'Do not work for the World Bank!' (Cooke & Kothari 2001) In other words, he advised development practitioners to avoid taking funding from international donors with political agendas at odds with national autonomy and norms. How, then, do we justify receiving support from just such a source?

As James Ferguson (1994) has pointed out, many development interventions are ostensibly technical but have instrumental political effects undreamed-of by staff who implement them. In our case, however, the reverse is true. The

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<sup>9</sup> The trials collapsed in January when the appointed judges resigned 'in embarrassment', and the NGO workers were allowed to leave the country. The most prominent organization involved was the International Republican Institute, initiator of the survey on which we based our own.

condition of Bedu in South Sinai is a product of unequal power relations and demands a political response; but in this authoritarian regime, politics must be cloaked in development. We therefore seek to make development interventions that produce wider outcomes. The development funding we might normally seek comes - like our own operational brief - with a strict injunction to be apolitical. However, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, with its emphasis on citizenship and participation, offered us a rare opportunity to pursue a wider agenda. MEPI staff have shown sensitivity towards our constraints, and striven to help us overcome the practical difficulties of a challenging brief. Their intent and practice have been supportive, and our outlook is pragmatic. We accepted their help with gratitude, and believe our decision is justified by our results: demonstrable progress in making Bedouin voices heard.

## **5: Conclusion**

In the wake of the January Revolution the international discourse of democracy and civic participation chimed with the *mo'assessa's* priorities, whereas neither accorded with the dominant national discourse respecting Bedu. This, as we have seen, has disparaged them as a people, neglected their condition, and failed utterly to deliver the state-citizen contract in South Sinai. Much of the disengagement we encountered among Bedu, and the caution with which people in Sinai embraced the new developments, stemmed from a fear that any benefits the Revolution might bring to Egypt would bypass them as usual.

Apart from letting our communities know that we took their needs seriously, our purpose was to encourage Bedu to stand up and claim an active role in shaping the new Egypt. When we established the *mo'assessa* back in 2006 we based our approach on Sen's idea of capability, which defines human

development as fostering the capacity of individuals to make free choices to improve their lives according to their own norms and values (Sen 1999; Gilbert 2009). We wanted to enhance people's agency, and with it their ability to make choices about how they live. Multiply excluded and with no access to social media or even basic communications, young Bedu were not part of the collective national consciousness seeking to negotiate new definitions of society in the public space of Midan Tahrir (ICP/JDGCP 2011:11). However, once offered the chance to express themselves safely, they created their own place in South Sinai's contested space, grounded in their identity as Bedu and powered by their own determination to bring about change. The meetings catalyzed a collective response that was waiting to happen.

The rhetoric of participation and democracy often evaporates leaving little of practical benefit; but this time, the vision and international perspective of the *mo'assessa* team, supportive funders, extensive community knowledge and recognition of its norms combined to deliver something tangible, and - we believe - lasting. In South Sinai the impulse to democracy has been let out of the bag. Whatever the nature of the new regime and whatever the cost, we predict that there will be no turning back.

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